



Driving With Parkinson's Disease

Supporting Safety, Independence, and Thoughtful Decision-Making Over Time

Driving represents independence, freedom, and connection—to work, family, healthcare, and community. For many people living with Parkinson's disease, questions about driving bring up concern, uncertainty, and emotion.

It is important to know: **a Parkinson's diagnosis alone does not mean you must stop driving.** Many people continue to drive safely for years. What matters is recognizing how symptoms may affect driving and making proactive, informed decisions that protect safety and dignity.

Through the **Wisconsin Parkinson Association**, individuals and families are encouraged to approach driving as an evolving skill—not an all-or-nothing decision.

Driving decisions in Parkinson's are about safety and planning—not loss of identity or independence.

How Parkinson's Can Affect Driving

Driving requires the coordination of multiple skills at once. Parkinson's symptoms—both motor and non-motor—can affect these abilities in different ways.

Potential challenges may include:

- Slower reaction time
- Reduced neck or trunk flexibility
- Tremor affecting steering or controls
- Visual changes (contrast, depth perception, hallucinations)
- Cognitive changes (attention, multitasking, decision-making)
- Fatigue or sleepiness

- Medication “on/off” fluctuations

Not everyone experiences these challenges—and many are mild or manageable, especially early on.

Signs That Driving May Be Becoming More Difficult

Common warning signs include:

- Getting lost on familiar routes
- Difficulty judging speed or distance
- Missing stop signs or signals
- Delayed braking or responses
- Increased anxiety while driving
- Scrapes, dents, or near-misses
- Feedback from passengers or family

Noticing changes early allows for planning—not crisis decisions.

Medication Timing & Driving

Medication timing can significantly affect driving ability.

Helpful strategies include:

- Driving during peak medication “on” times
- Avoiding driving during known “off” periods
- Being cautious if medications cause sleepiness or visual changes

If driving ability fluctuates with medication, your care team may be able to help adjust timing or dosing.

Vision & Driving Safety

Visual changes are common in Parkinson’s and can affect driving.

Important considerations include:

- Regular eye exams
- Awareness of night-driving difficulty
- Monitoring for double vision or hallucinations
- Avoiding driving in low-light or high-glare conditions if problematic

Good lighting, contrast, and updated prescriptions support safer driving.

Cognitive Load & Fatigue

Driving places high demands on attention and decision-making.

Helpful strategies include:

- Limiting driving when fatigued
- Avoiding busy or unfamiliar routes
- Reducing distractions in the car
- Planning trips during lower-stress times

Driving less or differently can extend safe driving longer.

Driver Evaluations: A Supportive Tool

A professional driving evaluation can provide:

- Objective assessment of driving skills
- Practical recommendations
- Adaptive strategies or equipment suggestions
- Peace of mind for individuals and families

A driving evaluation is **not a test you pass or fail**—it is a tool to guide safe choices.

Occupational therapists with driver rehabilitation training often conduct these evaluations.

Planning Ahead: Preserving Independence

Planning early allows for smoother transitions if driving needs change.

Helpful steps include:

- Exploring alternative transportation options
- Gradually reducing driving in challenging conditions
- Discussing plans with family before concerns arise
- Identifying rides, community transportation, or delivery services

Planning ahead protects independence—it doesn't take it away.

When to Talk With Your Care Team

Discuss driving with your provider if:

- You notice changes in confidence or safety
- Family members express concern
- You experience sleepiness, hallucinations, or confusion
- Falls, near-misses, or accidents occur

These conversations support safety and trust.

Emotional Impact of Driving Changes

Driving changes can bring:

- Grief or sadness
- Fear of isolation
- Anger or frustration
- Worry about burdening others

These feelings are valid. Support, counseling, and planning help ease transitions and preserve connection.

Living Well Beyond the Driver's Seat

Whether driving continues or changes, independence is not defined by a steering wheel.

Connection, purpose, and freedom come from staying engaged—not from driving alone.

With the right supports, people with Parkinson's continue to live active, connected lives.

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