

How do I talk to my senior parents about driving?



One Senior Place
Brenda Lyle
Guest Columnist

How do I talk to my senior parents about driving?

This can be a tough issue to tackle. The Sunshine State leads the nation in traffic fatalities involving at least one driver over 65, and the highest number of fatal crashes with drivers 90 or older.

Make no mistake: many seniors are cautious, excellent drivers. But aging can — and does — affect memory and decision-making processes, the ability to see and hear clearly, reaction times and other skills and abilities that are required for the safe operation of a car.

Seniors and their families routinely struggle with this important question, since a car in America means independence and mobility.

The best approach is to initiate a calm, caring conversation BEFORE an unsafe driving situation occurs.

- “I’m glad you made the decision to give up nighttime driving. I wouldn’t want you to be uncomfortable when you are driving.”
- “Have you asked your physician if your new medication will impair your driving ability?”
- “I’m worried about you getting lost.”
- “Let’s talk about alternative transportation options.”

A quick Google search turns up great resources to help keep older drivers on the road— SAFELY.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) publishes a tool called “My Mobility Plan” that guides seniors through an assessment of safety in their home and on the road.

Also from the CDC is: “My Neighborhood: A Plan to Stay Mobile in My

Neighborhood,” with various driving scenarios.

AARP Driver Safety, AAA and the American Occupational Therapy Association teamed up to create a program at CarFit.org, where older adults can check to see how well their personal vehicles “fit” them.

Driver refresher courses by AARP (in person or online) have the added benefit of lowering your insurance premiums once you pass the course.

There now are nearly 4 million licensed Florida drivers older than 65.

Once over 80, seniors must only pass a mature driver vision screening to renew their license for another six years.

So what do you do about unsafe driving by the senior in your life?

In Florida, you can use “Medical Reporting Form” 72190, to initiate a doctor certification of their ability to drive.

Once signed and submitted, the identity of the person making the report

is protected.

Taking the keys away from an aging parent is difficult — for everyone involved. One Senior Place can offer you advice with that difficult situation and provide a free copy of “My Mobility Plan.”

Don’t wait for your mom or dad to become a statistic. Take the first step to keeping them — and our roadways — safe.

One Senior Place is a marketplace for resources and provider of information, advice, care and on-site services for seniors and their families. Questions for this column are answered by professionals in nursing, social work, care management and in-home care. Send questions to askOSP@OneSeniorPlace.com or visit One Senior Place, The Experts in Aging at OneSeniorPlace.com.

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Cardiologist passionate about keeping your heart ticking

From Staff Reports
Florida Today
USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

Q: Why did you go into this career?

A: Initially, it was because I had been living away from my parents and they needed my help, so I moved closer to home. Medical school was nearby, so I decided to come closer to home.

Q: What services do you provide?

A: We’re making people live longer and live better. I manage patients with syncope, atrial fibrillation and adult congenital heart defects. My work is to prevent sudden cardiac death and to treat electrical abnormalities of the heart. I am also interested in providing mechanical therapies to prevent stroke in patients who have atrial fibrillation.

In treating these conditions, I offer ablations, pacemaker insertions, defibrillator implant surgery and many other procedures. I also implant the Watchman device, which reduces the risk of stroke in patients with atrial fibrillation.

Q: What makes this area of medicine fulfilling for you?

A: Electrophysiology is a fairly new discipline, developed in the last 40 years or so. There are lots of unknowns. We are still learning about it, which makes it exciting and challenging. I get to network with other electrophysiologists across the world to find solutions to intriguing problems. At the same time, I can disseminate that information to primary care physicians and to patients.

Interventional cardiology is a mature subspecialty. It’s like the Mississippi River, which begins as a narrow stream

in Itasca, Minnesota. The farther down you go, the river broadens and swells. As people live longer, there are newer problems evolving.

Electrophysiology corresponds to the point that New Orleans occupies on the river. It involves taking care of the more advanced problems that are created with people living longer, and improving their quality of life by other subspecialties of cardiology. The rapid evolution of electrophysiology always challenges my intellectual capacity.

Q: When did you realize this was the right medical career path for you?

At Buffalo, New York, where I did my residency, there was an electrophysiologist who inspired me. The solutions he offered were unique, and that had an influence on me.

Q: What’s the latest advancement in your field that will benefit patients?

A: What’s really coming into play now is the Watchman device. Ablation for atrial fibrillation is becoming more and more important and is now mainstream treatment. The devices are getting smaller all the time.

During the last 20 years, there has been an evolution of understanding, of treatments and technologies — they’re just getting better and better. We can now help patients in more advanced stages of disease. There is a new field of electricuticals (electrical therapies) emerging, which helps in advancing quality of care. It is also helping people live longer.

Q: Best advice for current and potential patients?



Dr. Porur E. Somasundaram is a cardiac electrophysiologist, cardiologist & internist for Steward’s Rockledge Regional Medical Center.
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A: In addition to the usual advice — exercise, stay stress-free, practice good dietary patterns — be sure to take advantage of the medical technology now available.

On television, you’ll see ads for products that allow you to do ECGs at home. Older people in Florida can benefit from devices that evaluate them in the convenience of their homes.

If, indeed, they discover atrial fibrillation, they should consult their physician. The most important objective is to prevent strokes if they find this abnormal rhythm.

Lots of advancements are coming to the phones in the form of apps to check the blood pressure, sugars, oxygen sat-

Get to Know Your Health Pro

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Education: I went to medical school at Madras Medical College, University of Madras in Madras, India. My residency was at Millard Fillmore Hospital, SUNY at Buffalo in Buffalo, New York. I completed my cardiology fellowship at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis and then went on to complete my electrophysiology fellowship at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center at Los Angeles.

Professional Background: During my long medical career, I have practiced in India, the U.K. and the United States. Most recently, I was a cardiologist and electrophysiologist at St. Luke’s Hospital in Duluth, Minnesota, where I practiced for about 11 years.

uration, etc. These advancements will put some of the diagnostic capabilities into people’s hands, in the convenience of their homes, to diagnose and monitor illnesses.

Have a suggestion for FLORIDA TODAY’s Know Your Health Pro feature? Contact Tim Walters at twalters@floridatoday.com

Staying social can boost healthy ‘gray matter’ in aging brains

HEALTHDAY NEWS

Older adults who get together with friends, volunteer or go to classes have healthier brains, which could help them ward off dementia, according to a new study.

Researchers who used brain imaging to examine brain areas involved in mental decline found that greater social engagement made a difference in brain health.

Being socially engaged — even moderately — with at least one relative or friend activates parts of the brain needed to recognize familiar faces and emotions, make decisions and feel rewarded, the study found.

“We need to do more research on the details, but that’s the beauty of this — social engagement costs hardly anything, and we do not have to worry about side effects,” said lead author Dr. Cynthia Felix, a geriatrician and post-doctoral associate at the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health.

“There is no cure for dementia, which has tremendous costs in terms of treatment and caregiving. Preventing dementia, therefore, has to be the focus. It’s the ‘use it or lose it’ philosophy when it comes to the brain,” she said in a university news release.

The researchers drew on information from nearly 300 community-dwelling seniors (average age: 83) who had a sensitive brain scan to gauge the integrity of brain cells used for social engagement.

Once brain cells die, dementia typically follows. Researchers said it’s not yet clear whether social engagement keeps brains healthy or if having a healthy brain leads to more socializing.

Either way, the findings suggest that



“prescribing” socialization could benefit older adults’ brain health — similar to the way prescribing physical activity can help prevent diabetes or heart disease. Existing programs that provide group physical activities would be a good starting point, Felix said.

“Our data were collected before the COVID-19 pandemic, but I believe our findings are particularly important right now, since a one-size-fits-all social isolation of all older adults may place them at risk for conditions such as dementia,” she said.

“Older adults should know it is important for their brain health that they still seek out social engagement in safe and balanced ways during the pandemic,” Felix advised.

The findings were reported Oct. 19 in the Journal of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences.

Older adults who get together with friends, volunteer or go to classes have healthier brains, which could help them ward off dementia, according to a new study. GETTY IMAGES

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