


## DRIVING AFTER A BRAIN INJURY

*Courage Center*

*(Revised by Brain Injury Association of Minnesota)*



Because of our highly motorized society and the independence driving provides, one of the more commonly asked questions after a person has a brain injury is, “When can I start driving again?” This question can raise concerns for people who have brain injuries, family members, physicians and therapists. Not all persons with brain injury have the necessary problem solving ability, judgment, reaction time and emotional stability to return to driving. Statistics show that approximately 50% of all people with brain injury do have the necessary skills and abilities to drive safely and independently. The intent of this article will be to answer some questions commonly asked by persons with brain injury, physicians, family members, and therapists concerning returning to driving.

- Q. Are driving privileges or the actual driver’s license automatically taken away after a person has a brain injury and what are the legal implications of returning to driving?
- A. Because a person has a brain injury, driving privileges are not automatically terminated. (*Unless the person was involved in a motor vehicle crash and a traffic violation was issued at that time warranting termination of driving privileges.*) It is the doctor’s responsibility and decision to determine whether or not the person’s driver’s license should be turned into the State Department of Transportation. If this action is taken, the person will be notified by mail that their privilege to drive will be canceled until they have met the requirements set forth by the State Department of Transportation. (A doctor is not required by law to report that a person’s driver’s license be revoked. Thus a person may still possess a valid driver’s license even when clearly he/she would not be a safe driver. Family members often become the initiators of placing restrictions on driving privileges.)
- Q. If a person’s driver’s license is taken away after a brain injury, what is required to get it back?
- A. In order to get a driver’s license back, the following is required:
1. A medical statement submitted by the person’s doctor stating that the privilege to drive be considered for re-instatement. Each case is reviewed by the Department of Transportation Medical Review Board consisting of physicians and transportation specialists.
  2. The Medical Review Board may require that driving skills and abilities be assessed by a driving program that specializes in working with people who have disabilities.
  3. The Medical Review Board may also require that the person take and pass the State written and/or road test.
- Q. If a person currently possesses a valid license, what then?
- A. Legally the driver’s license is still valid until its renewal date. Most state renewal applications ask the question, “Have you ever had a convulsive disorder, blackout, stroke, paralysis, diabetes or other type of physical or mental impairment.” It is

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suggested that a person honestly answer the question. If a person answers “yes” they may be required to meet all or part of the requirements listed in question two. Also, if adaptive driving equipment is needed such as a steering device, turn signal extender, left foot accelerator pedal, hand controls, etc., this will need to be listed as a restriction on the driver’s license. The individual will have to take a State road test using the adaptive driving equipment. Each time the person drives any vehicle all adaptive equipment must be used.

- Q. How is it determined that a person is ready to drive?
- A. Having a driving assessment is a good way to determine whether or not a person has reached the point of being a safe and independent driver. Generally, a driving assessment will consist of the following:

#### **PRE-DRIVING ASSESSMENT INFORMATION**

It is helpful to the driving evaluator to receive the following clinical information from the individual’s rehabilitation team prior to the driving assessment: current cognitive, perceptual, emotional and physical status.

#### **VISION AND REACTION TIME ASSESSMENT**

*Vision* will generally be assessed for visual acuity, depth perception and field of vision. *Reaction* time will be assessed as to the amount of time it takes to react to: accelerator to brake (foot or hand operation) — under one second is acceptable.

#### **IN-VEHICLE/ON-STREET ASSESSMENT**

(Before an on-street assessment can take place, the driver must have a valid driver’s license or valid learner’s permit.) It is felt that this portion of the assessment gets to the heart of whether or not a person can safely drive on public streets. First, with the vehicle stationary, it is determined whether or not there is a need for any type of adaptive driving equipment to assist with safe handling of the motor vehicle. During the on-street assessment the following areas are observed and assessed while driving:

- § cognitive ability to identify traffic control markings, attention span and ability to respond to changing road and traffic conditions;
- § depth perception, i.e. in turning corners safely;
- § spatial relationships, i.e., being able to tell how far apart to drive behind or next to another car, curb, pedestrian, etc.;
- § ability to accurately interpret visual stimuli, i.e., to hit the brakes if a child runs out in front of the vehicle, pull over to the side of the road if an emergency vehicle is approaching.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Once the assessment has been completed, the results are compiled from all components of the driving assessment to determine strengths and weaknesses as related to the person’s driving. The assessment should also include a recommendation as to whether the person should take the State written and/or road test. If adaptive driving equipment was used or recommended during the assessment, these should be clearly listed naming the type of equipment and where the equipment can be purchased and installed. The evaluator may feel



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that with practice driving skills will improve, and if so, behind-the-wheel driving lessons may be recommended. Also, lessons may be recommended if the driver has to learn how to use adaptive equipment. At the end of the assessment, it should be clearly stated in writing whether or not the person can return to independent driving.

**OTHER REASONS WHY YOU MAY NEED A DRIVING ASSESSMENT...**

- § If you apply for a handicapped parking sticker, your driver's license may be canceled if a doctor's medical report is not submitted along with the application.
- § Because your driver's license may have been canceled due to being medically unqualified. To get it back, or to have it reinstated, you will be required to submit a medical report from your doctor.
- § Because you are a new driver with a disability and you want to get a permit. You will not be issued a permit until you submit a medical report from your doctor.
- § Because your physical limitation may warrant the need for adaptive driving equipment.
- § Because your doctor may not want to submit a medical report unless you have a driving assessment.

If you have further, more specific questions, such as where driving assessments are offered, where to get adaptive driving equipment, or car insurance, contact Courage Center's Adaptive Driver Education Program at (612) 520-0310 or (612) 520-0325.

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