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Senior drivers dread conversation about handing over keys

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96-year-old John Villa drives with confidence: 96-year-old John Villa drives with confidence



96-year-old John Villa drives with confidence



ITN Metro Detroit gives rides to the elderly

By **Robin Erb**
Detroit Free Press Medical Writer

John Villa laughs about it now — the “conspiracy” last year to take away his car keys, he calls it.

“I was a little incensed,” said the 96-year-old former manufacturing manager.

The conversation wasn’t easy for his children either.

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"We were very cognizant of the fact — and this is important — that if he lost his ability to drive, this would seriously affect his independence and his sense of self," said daughter Nancy Villa Bryk, an Eastern Michigan University professor.

"It was a very difficult conversation, and he found it profoundly upsetting, which was upsetting to me," she said.

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John Villa, 96, of Beverly Hills is still driving after he passed a driver's exam with flying colors in December. Villa cherishes his independence and does most of the errands for he and his wife Jean, 75. / Mandi Wright/Detroit Free Press



John Villa, 96, of Beverly Hills buys flowers for his wife, Jean, 75. He passed a driving test last year. He limits himself to familiar roads and daylight hours, and though his children say they're happy to provide alternative transportation, he said he will drive on his own as long as he can. It's a matter of self-preservation, he said. / Mandi Wright/Detroit Free Press

Talking to loved ones about driving

Video: [96-year-old John Villa drives with confidence](#)

Analyzed by miles traveled, the risk of being involved in a fatal crash begins climbing at age 75 and increases notably after age 80 — a result of increasingly frail bodies and medical complications from injuries.

And though older drivers are less likely to get into accidents overall, in part because they limit their driving to familiar roads and safer times of the day, research suggests they have a tougher time making left turns at intersections, for example.

But for many families, the question of *Is it time to park the car for the last time?* is rarely answered by a medical problem or serious accident.

Rather, it's the little, insidious failings of the aging body that chip away at our ability to drive and trigger those nagging worries from loved ones.

"It creeps up on you," said **Dr. Pratik Bhattacharya**, a neurologist for Detroit Medical Center's Sinai Grace Hospital and an assistant professor at Wayne State University.

Cataracts and other eye problems mean nighttime glare. Arthritis makes it difficult to grip the wheel or twist your torso to check different directions. Nerve damage dulls the senses, making it more difficult to apply the proper pressure on gas and brake pedals or to make the switch between pedals quickly.

Medications muddle thinking.



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! Do your homework. Observe driving habits first. Age, itself, does not make one a poor driver. A worksheet, "[Warning Signs for Older Drivers](#)," is at [www.thehartford.com](#).

! Approach the topic gently over time, rather than wait for an accident or a moment when the senior might be embarrassed.


! Start with *I've been thinking about... or I saw this article about driving* and avoid language that seems accusatory: *You shouldn't drive anymore*.

! Identify the person whom the senior is most likely to trust. Outspoken family members may not be the right choice at the beginning, although they may enforce driving decisions later on, if necessary. The Hartford Center for Mature Market Excellence indicates that marital status should play a role. About half of married drivers would rather hear concerns from spouses, although doctors are a close second. Drivers living alone prefer to hear first from their doctors, then from adult children, friends and others.

! Start with a plan to help them replace their own driving with other transportation. Family members can help with errands from time to time and they can try a taxi service once in a while. That eases the transition even as the senior begins to limit driving when it's safest and planning for alternatives.

! The Area Agency on Aging offers a [mobility transition plan](#) at [www.my2ride.com](#) under the "Driving Tips and How to Help an Older Driver" tab. It may be helpful to compare costs, too, for owning and maintaining a vehicle versus using public transportation. A transportation cost worksheet is at [www.thehartford.com](#).

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Additionally, when cognitive abilities start to decline, they chip away at your insight, he said: "You think you're driving fine and you're not," Bhattacharya said.

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That means that well-intentioned concern from loved ones can lead to hurt feelings, resistance and angry self-defense.

"It is a difficult conversation to have," said Roberta Habowski, mobility project manager at the [Southfield-based Area Agency on Aging, 1-B](#). "How would you feel if I say, you can't drive tomorrow?"

She and others say the first rule to follow: Know that age alone doesn't deteriorate driving.

"There are 50-year-olds who shouldn't be driving. There are 90-year-olds who can," said Kimberly Lariviere, senior mobility specialist with the Michigan Department of Transportation, a sponsor of the [North American Conference on Elderly Mobility](#) being held in Detroit this week.

Not ready to give it up

For his part, Villa volunteers for five organizations, including Wayne State University's Institute of Gerontology. He runs errands, visits friends and drops by Costco sometimes to pick up flowers for his wife, Jean.

And he wasn't ready to give that up last year when his family approached him with their concerns.

"I said, 'This is something we need to start talking about,' " recalled his son, John Villa, an attorney in Washington, D.C. "He said 'I do understand I can't drive forever and I know my limits.' ... He was defensive about it; I think anybody would be defensive about it."

! **Video:** [96-year-old John Villa drives with confidence](#)

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On Dec. 12, Villa and his son-in-law reported to a branch office of the Secretary of State, where an instructor drove with Villa for a re-examination of his driver's test.

The papers came days later in the mail, Villa said: He passed.

And he continues to drive, though he limits himself to familiar roads and daylight hours. And though his children say they're happy to provide alternative transportation for him, he said he will drive on his own as long as he can.

It's a matter of self-preservation, he said.

"Some people, they retire and sit in front of a TV or do something inane that doesn't really help them to be cognitively alert," he said.

The driver's license, he said, is a "lifeline."

"I have to have something mentally to keep me doing, otherwise I'll atrophy," he said.

Rides, bus or cabs

Miriam Freeling, in contrast, said she hadn't known the stress of driving until she was out from under it.

Just before Christmas, the retired occupational therapist had become hopelessly lost on the way to the home of a longtime friend.

Four days later — a week after John Villa passed his driver's test — a Henry Ford Hospital neurologist was kind but firm: *Miriam, it's not a question of whether you are going to have an accident, it's a matter of when*, recalled Miriam and Neal Freeling, married for 32 years.

They called their son. Miriam Freeling, 83, remembered saying, "Well, we're not driving anymore," and he said, 'I'm so glad.' "

Neal Freeling, 75, wasn't surprised at his son's reaction.

Over time, the elder Freeling, who is blind and can't drive, said his son "would take me to the side and say 'Dad, Mom's missing stuff while she's driving — missing turns, not reading signs well.' I said 'We're having that discussion, and when the time is right it will happen.'"

These days, the Freelings use the bus or cabs. They accept rides from loved ones and others only if they're allowed to buy them a meal or occasionally fill up their gas tank. They kept their Subaru for those occasions, too.

And they insist on living life as they did before — visiting friends, attending shows and making appointments at the doctor's offices

and beauty shop.

"I feel like the Queen of England," Miriam Freeling said, chuckling. "I'm in the back of the car and I look at things and I'm seeing things that I never saw while driving. Stores, the people. When you're driving, you're focused on the road and where you're going.

"I just sit there and enjoy talking to whoever is driving," she said.

Contact Robin Erb: reb@freepress.com or 313-222-2708. Follow her on Twitter <https://twitter.com/FreepHealth>.

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