

Elderly Drivers as Risky as Teens

By [Wesley E. Wright](#) and [Molly Dear Abshire](#), as published in the Houston Chronicle Senior Living Section on October 16, 2013.

No federal or Texas law defining an elderly driver exists, and no state has an age limit to stop driving. Drivers age 100 and above can legally drive in all 50 states. However, most states, including Texas, concentrate on renewal requirements for elderly drivers. Renewal requirements might include appearing in person to renew your driver's license and appearing more often to renew or retake part or all of a driving test. However, few states require more than a basic vision test to grant a renewal. Most, including Texas, do not test for diminished physical capacity or cognitive awareness. Few states require elderly persons to take behind-the-wheel driving tests.

Aging doesn't necessarily make one a bad driver. But older drivers are more prone to car crashes, even as they drive less due to declining skills and vision, impaired cognitive abilities, and slower reaction time.

Per miles driven, older drivers are involved in more fatal car crashes than any other age group except teenagers. The U.S. Census Bureau projects there will be 9.6 million people 85 and older by 2030. When all Baby Boomers are at least 65, they will be responsible for 25 percent of all fatal crashes.

Prior to September 1, 2007, Texas law required only an in-person driver's license renewal every 12 years. Thus, a person renewing his license at 79 years old wouldn't have his vision checked again until age 91.

"Katie's Law" changed that. Katie Bolka, a 17-year-old high school student in Dallas was on her way to class in the spring of 2006, when an elderly driver ran a red light and broadsided her car just a few blocks from the driver's home. That morning the driver had backed across her lawn, over the curb, across the street and into the curb on the other side. Katie died a few days later. Now, anyone aged 79 or older in Texas must renew their driver's license in person. Drivers 85 years or older must renew in person every two years. The in-person renewal process includes a vision test, and the Department of Public Safety may require a driving test or a written test if the examiner believes a person's ability is questionable. Additionally, the driver may be required to submit medical records for review by a medical review board.

Katie's law is a start. However, family members are the best judges to evaluate when to limit an elderly loved one's driving. Three key functions for safe driving are: vision, cognition, and motor/sensory function. Signs to look for include, unexplained dents in the car, multiple traffic tickets or fender benders. If you suspect that his driving ability is declining, then get in the car with your loved one and let them take you somewhere. If that seems daunting, then it's probably time to take away the keys.

Having the driving conversation early helps. Discuss options and alternatives for future transportation. A good resource for this discussion can be found online at www.aarp.org/home-

[garden/transportation/](#).

An elderly driver's physician could be asked for support. The NHTSA Physician Guide to Assessing and Counseling Older Drivers is a helpful tool in determining an elderly patient's driving ability.

Taking the car keys from elderly persons who have driven for decades restricts their independence. Make the transition easier by establishing alternatives, like offering to drive, hiring a driver or other public transportation. Whatever you do, don't leave them isolated.