



It's a matter of safety

Decisions for Tennessee's Senior Drivers





Introduction

Am I Still a Safe Driver?

Has my driving changed as I've gotten older? Am I more of a risk to myself and others when I get behind the wheel? Do I get hints from others that my driving isn't as safe as it used to be?

Those are tough questions to tackle. No one wants to face the reduced mobility or loss of independence that may result when he or she can no longer drive.

There's an assumption that older drivers are less safe than younger ones. But it may not be true. We know that in general older adults are safe drivers. They have high safety-belt use and low rates of citations for speeding, reckless driving, and alcohol-related charges.

Still, there are reasons why driving presents particular challenges to older people, including:

- Changes in vision, cognition, and physical function
- Medical conditions
- The use of medications.

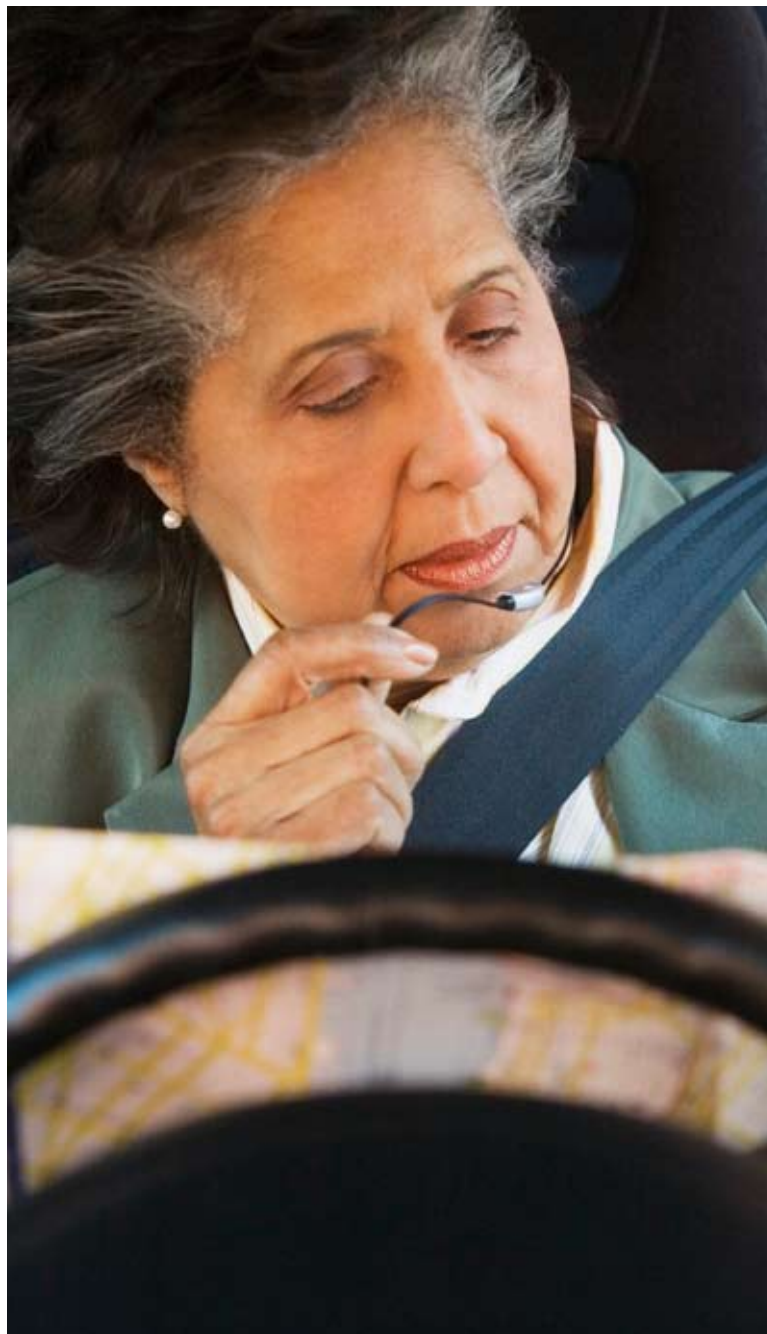
Our driving skills may deteriorate slowly so that we're unaware of what's happening.

It's all about safety

Why are these issues so important? As with many aspects of aging, our skills may deteriorate slowly so that we're largely unaware of what's happening. Sometimes it takes an unfortunate event such as a car accident to make us realize that we may be risking our own safety or that of others. An accident could cause physical harm as well as financial hardship for you or your family. Drivers over 75 are more likely to die in a traffic accident than younger drivers simply because they are generally more fragile and less able to withstand severe physical injuries.

Giving up driving completely isn't your only option when faced with the knowledge that your driving skills aren't as sharp as they used to be. There are refresher courses that can help you maintain your skills, and you may want to consider some vehicle modifications that will make driving easier and increase your confidence.

This booklet will help you look at some of the issues surrounding driving safety, initiate discussions with family or friends, and answer the question, "Am I still a safe driver?"



Issues That Can Affect Older Drivers

A number of issues related to physical and mental functioning can affect our driving ability as we age.

Vision

Vision is the primary sense we use to help us make decisions while driving. But our eyesight typically begins to grow worse at about age 45 and continues to deteriorate as we get older. Some of the decline isn't correctable with eyeglasses. The ability to distinguish details is lessened, and we become less able to change focus quickly between faraway objects and ones that are closer to us. The field of vision narrows, which may make it difficult to spot road signs or pedestrians.

As older drivers, we need much more light to see well than younger drivers, and it can take us more than twice as long to adjust to changes from light to darkness. This makes driving at night a particular challenge. The glare from other vehicles' headlights can be very distracting, and it takes longer to recover from it. Many seniors decide to stop driving at night altogether and choose to limit their driving to the daytime hours.





What are some things you can do to compensate for reduced vision?

- Have your eyes examined regularly, at least every year or two. It's important not only to make sure your eyeglass prescription is up to date but also to be checked for conditions such as cataracts and glaucoma.
- Keep your car's windows and mirrors clean, inside and out.
- Get used to turning your head more frequently to increase your field of vision, and constantly check the road ahead to see if any problems are coming up ahead of you.

Mental Skills

Our brains process information more slowly as we age, and our reaction time is slower. That can create difficulties for driving, which often demands quick thinking. However, older drivers generally have good judgment and the benefit of years of experience, and those qualities help compensate for any slowing in reaction time.

There are ways you can accommodate this potential difficulty:

- Plan your route ahead of time so you won't have to make snap decisions and can avoid spots that you know cause difficulties.
- Leave plenty of room between your car and the one ahead of you so you'll have enough time to stop if the need arises.
- Turn off the radio and your cell phone. Keep other distractions such as conversation to a minimum.

Physical Fitness and Health

Being physically fit can help you maintain your driving skills. You may have a condition such as arthritis that causes stiffness or pain in the neck, shoulders, arms, hands, or ankles. That may reduce mobility, making it difficult to turn your head and check behind the car when backing up or passing, to move quickly when you need to press the accelerator or brake, or even to turn the steering wheel.

There are ways you can compensate for these difficulties:

- Maintain your physical fitness. If you don't exercise already, it's never too late to start. Just be sure to check with your doctor about any physical limitations that might affect your ability to exercise.



- Even a basic exercise program such as walking five times a week for 30 minutes will help you stay strong and improve your balance.
- If possible, include both weight training and cardiovascular exercise in your workout program so that you're strengthening your core muscles and maintaining flexibility.

Medications

Both prescription and nonprescription drugs can affect your ability to drive safely. Many medications cause drowsiness, slow your reaction time, reduce energy levels, and have other effects that interfere with driving. Medicines to be particularly concerned about include antidepressants, pain relievers, sleeping pills, antihistamines, and decongestants. If any medication makes you feel sleepy or disoriented, don't drive.

Vision changes are a particular challenge for older drivers

Here are some other precautions about medications and driving:

- Ask your doctor or pharmacist whether the possible side effects of your medications are likely to affect your driving.
- When you start a new medication, avoid driving temporarily until you determine how it affects you.
- Read all medication labels. If they advise you to not operate heavy machinery while taking the drug, avoid driving.

Learn more at these websites:

www.seniordrivers.org

Research, driving tips, giving up keys, health and fitness exercises to maintain flexibility

www.aarp.org/life/drive

Online driving skills test, driver safety class information, tips on safe driving



What to watch for as you age

How can you tell whether you're still driving safely or not? Here are a few things to watch for.

Nervousness while driving

Has your confidence in your driving diminished so that you feel nervous and uncertain when you get in the car?

More tickets or warnings

Have you been issued more tickets or warnings in the recent past for offenses such as driving the wrong way on a one-way street, running a red light, or failing to yield the right of way?

Accidents

Have you been involved in “fender-benders” or more serious auto accidents in the recent past? Do you notice more dents or scratches in your car? Have you had more-frequent close calls where you were almost involved in an accident?

Reactions of others

Are friends or family members more reluctant to ride with you than they used to be? Do other drivers frequently honk at you?

Getting lost or confused

Do you get lost more frequently, even in familiar places? Do you have a hard time staying in the proper lane? Are you exhausted or upset when you come home from driving somewhere?

These warning signs may indicate that your driving skills are deteriorating.

Tough driving situations

Certain driving situations pose an extra risk for older drivers. Here are some of the most common.

Driving at night

Because most seniors experience some deterioration in their vision, driving in darkness poses a particular challenge. Older drivers need more light to see clearly, and they require more time to adjust to changes in lighting conditions. Many seniors avoid driving at night altogether because they realize it may compromise their safety and that of others.

Making left turns

Changes in depth perception and other vision changes may make turning across traffic difficult. It can be hard to judge how far away cars are and how fast they're moving. One way of adapting to this difficulty is to avoid left turns by driving ahead and making three right turns to get to your destination.



Heavy traffic

Driving in heavy rush hour traffic or on freeways can be especially challenging. Merging onto freeways is a particular area of difficulty for many older drivers because of the need to see clearly, judge the speed of other cars, and make quick decisions about when it's safe.

Backing up

Limited visibility makes backing up a challenge for drivers of any age. It may be even more difficult for older people if stiffness in the neck or shoulders makes it hard to turn around and see what's behind the car. Remember to check all mirrors and turn your head to look around you before you start.

Driving in unfamiliar areas

Older drivers may still be able to drive with relative safety on familiar streets and highways. However, when they're in unfamiliar territory, the large amount of new information they need to take in, such as street signs, building numbers, and new traffic patterns, can make it difficult to drive safely.



Improve Your Driving Safety

The question of whether you can still drive safely isn't necessarily an either/or proposition. Although you may be affected by poorer vision and slower reaction time, there are ways to adapt, including sharpening your driving skills and following certain precautions when you're behind the wheel.

Sharpening your skills

Many resources exist to help you understand age-related changes and improve your driving skills. Your local AAA club may offer a refresher course for older drivers. Some chapters of the National Safety Council and AARP also offer information and tips on safe driving. A physical rehabilitation specialist may provide assistance if you have had a stroke or other illness that affects your driving.





Here are some online sources of help:

AARP offers eight-hour driver safety courses taught in a classroom setting. The state of Tennessee requires insurance companies to discount the cost of collision coverage for drivers who complete this course. An online version of the class is also available.

For information and class locations, go to www.aarp.org/families/driver_safety or call 888-227-7669.

AAA Roadwise Review is a CD-ROM screening tool that allows seniors to measure in the privacy of their own home the eight functional abilities shown to be the strongest predictors of crash risk among older drivers. Contact your local AAA office to find out how to obtain a copy, or go to www.seniordrivers.org/home.

The AAA Foundation offers tips and information on safe driving. A survey entitled Drivers 55 Plus: Test Your Own Performance is available online. Go to www.aaafoundation.org.

The American Association of Occupational Therapists offers information for professionals, consumers, and caregivers on evaluating your driving fitness, community mobility, and finding a driving rehab specialist. Go to www.aota.org/olderdriver.

Precautions

You may already be a safe driver, but here are reminders of some simple precautions you can take to improve your driving safety.

- Don't drive when you're tired, and never drink and drive. The effects of alcohol on driving ability are even more significant in an older person than a younger one.
- When driving through intersections, take your time and check carefully for pedestrians, cyclists, and cars coming from other streets. If you need to turn left at an intersection that doesn't have a traffic light, consider driving ahead and making three right turns instead.
- Minimize distractions when you drive. Keep the radio volume low or turn it off altogether. If you have passengers and their conversation is distracting to you, remind them that you'll be safer with less noise in the car.



- Never talk on your cell phone as you drive. Even using a headset creates a distraction that can be dangerous. If your phone rings and you feel you need to answer it, pull off the road to a safe spot and then respond to the call.
- Make sure your windshield and all other windows and mirrors are clean, inside and out.
- Always obey the speed limit, and leave plenty of room between you and the car ahead, especially in rainy or other hazardous conditions. If you drive slower than other vehicles, stay in the right lane.

Make your car safer

You can improve your capacity for safe driving by making sure your car has as many safety features as possible. Here are some of the most important.

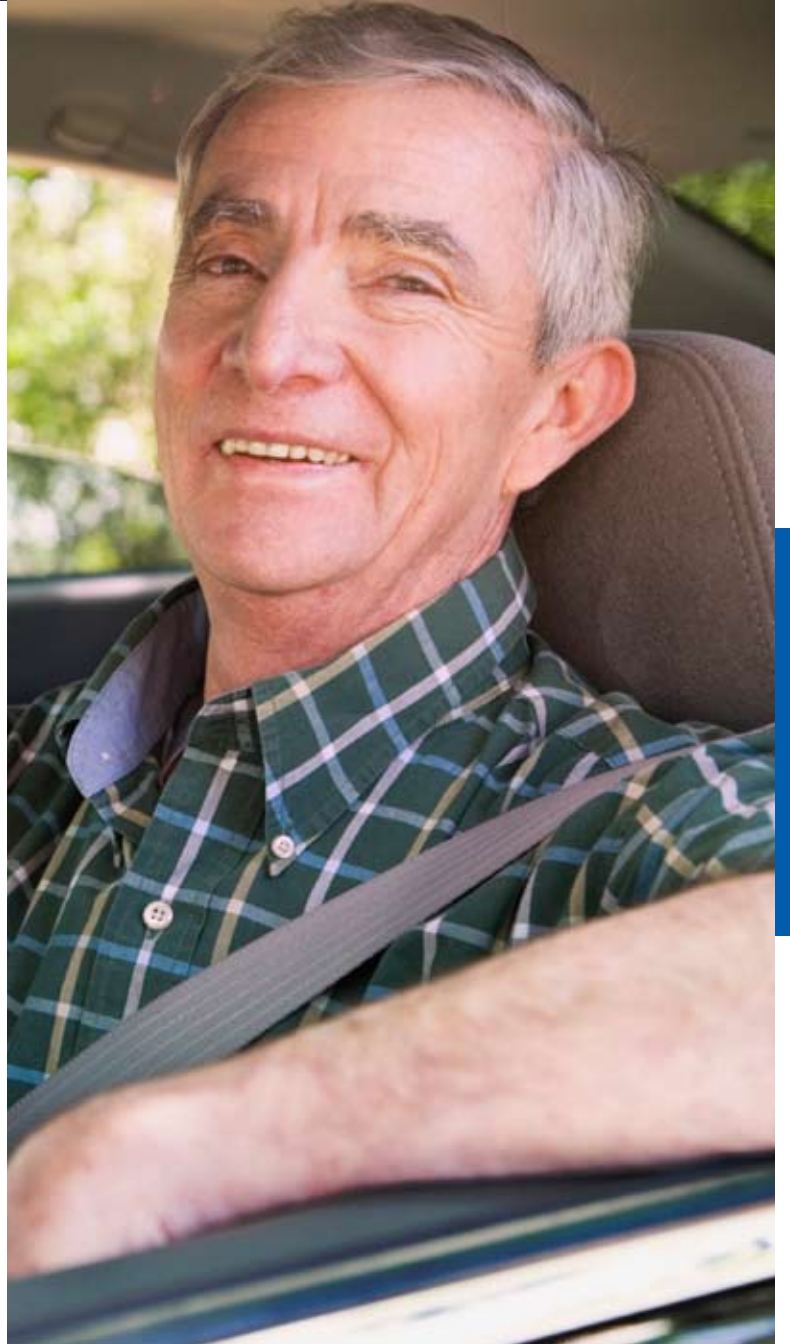
- Power steering and power antilock brakes to compensate for any reduction in strength or mobility
- Automatic transmission

- Adjustable driver's seat and steering wheel so you can sit high enough to see over the steering wheel
- Front and side airbags for maximum protection in a crash
- Untinted windshield for better vision
- Adaptive equipment such as wide-angle mirrors, pedal extenders, and steering knobs.

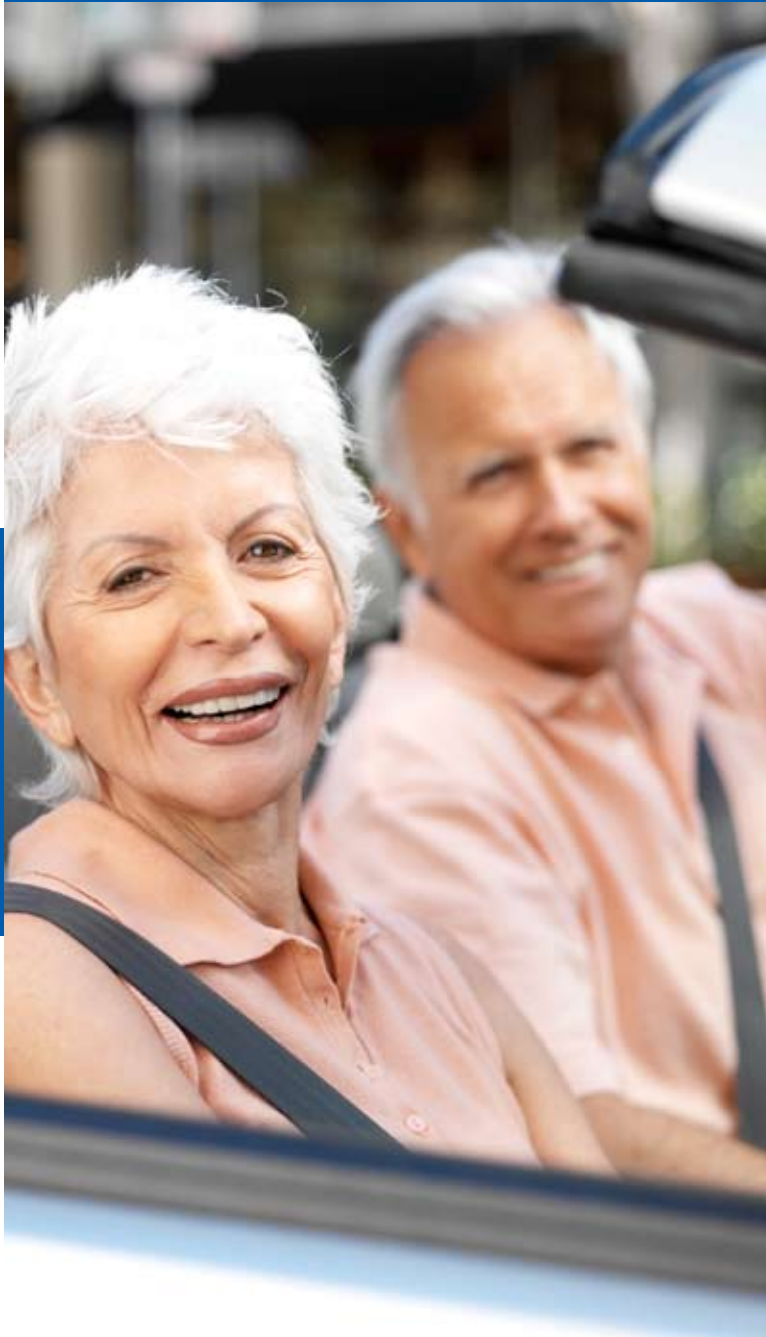
Resources

A program called CarFit, sponsored by AARP, AAA, and the American Occupational Therapy Association, can help you check how well your car “fits” you in terms of safety and comfort. Trained technicians or health professionals will work with you to determine whether your car is properly adjusted for you. This assessment takes about 30 minutes. You can check for a CarFit event near you or download the CarFit brochure at www.car-fit.org.

A DVD entitled *Keep Moving Longer: Features for Safe Driving* is available from the Gerontology Institute of the University of Massachusetts Boston. It demonstrates vehicle modifications, most of which are low-tech and low-cost, that can help you keep driving safely. You can get it by calling 617-287-7300, or go to <http://158.121.160.72/inst/projects/promoting.jsp>.



WHEN TO STOP



When to Stop Driving

How will you know when it's time to stop driving? Perhaps you'll realize on your own that you no longer feel confident behind the wheel. Maybe you've become confused about your location while driving or have had a number of accidents. A trusted friend or family member may have told you that they're concerned about your safety, or you may have had a stroke or other medical condition that has impaired your health and your ability to meet the demands of driving.

It can be difficult to give up the mobility that a car offers, but your safety and that of others is the main concern.

If you have read the warning signs in this booklet and recognized yourself in a number of them, it may be time to ask a friend, family member, or trusted professional such as your doctor whether you should stop driving.



It helps to plan ahead for the day when you decide it's no longer safe to drive. Line up some resources to help you meet your transportation needs so you'll still be able to get where you need to go. Enlist the help of a family member to help you find these resources. They may be:

- Public transit systems
- Local community transportation services such as a senior center van or agency minibus.
- Taxi services
- Family and friends.

Details on alternative transportation available in Tennessee can be found in the Resources section that follows.





Alternative Transportation Resources in Tennessee

These public transportation resources can help ensure that you stay mobile even after you've given up driving your own car. Call them or check their websites for information on special assistance available to seniors. Ask whether they offer discounts and special seating for seniors. Also find out if they provide "travel training" to help you out the first time you use their service.



Urban transit systems

Bristol Tennessee Transit System (BTTS)

423-989-5586

www.bristoltn.org/Transportation.cfm

Chattanooga Area Regional Transportation Authority (ARTA)

423-629-1411

www.gocarta.org

Clarksville Transit System (CTS)

931-553-2430

www.cityofclarksville.com/transit/index.asp

Cleveland Urban Area Transit System

423-478-1396

www.cityofcleveland.com

Franklin Transit Authority

615-790-0604

www.franklinrolleys.org

Gatlinburg Mass Transit System

865-436-3897

www.ci.gatlinburg.tn.us

Jackson Transit Authority (JTA)

731-423-0200

www.ridejta.com

Johnson City Transit System (JCTS)

423-929-7119

www.johnsoncitytransit.org

Kingsport Area Transit Service (KATS)

423-224-2612

www.kingsporttransit.org



Knoxville Area Transit (KAT)

865-215-7800

www.katbus.com

Lakeway Area Transit (Morristown)

423-581-6277

www.ethrapublictransit.org

Memphis Area Transit Authority (MATA)

901-722-7100

www.matatransit.com

City of Murfreesboro (Rover)

615-893-6441

www.murfreesborotn.gov

Nashville (MTA)

615-880-3970

www.nashvillemta.org

City of Oak Ridge

865-482-2785

www.oakridgepublictransit.org

Pigeon Forge Fun Time Trolleys (PFTS)

865-453-6444

www.pigeonforgetrolley.org

Regional Transportation Authority (RTA)

615-882-8833

rta@gnrc.org

City of Sevierville

865-453-5504

www.seviervilletn.org

Rural Transit Systems

These rural systems provide services to the general public in the counties listed:

East Tennessee Human Resource Agency

865-408-0843 or 1-800-232-1565

www.ethrapublictransit.org

Serving Anderson, Blount, Campbell, Claiborne, Cocke, Grainger, Hamblen, Jefferson, Knox, Loudon, Monroe, Morgan, Roane, Scott, Sevier, and Union counties

First Tennessee Human Resource Agency

423-461-8233

www.fthra.org or www.nettrans.org

Serving Carter, Greene, Hawkins, Johnson, Sullivan, Unicoi, and Washington counties

Hancock County Rural Transportation

423-733-2183

www.hancockcountytransit.org

Serving Hancock County

Delta Human Resource Agency

901-476-5226

www.deltahra.org

Serving Fayette, Lauderdale, Shelby, and Tipton counties



Mid-Cumberland Human Resource Agency

1-866-456-4967

www.mchratransit.org

Serving Cheatham, Davidson, Dickson, Houston, Humphreys, Montgomery, Robertson, Rutherford, Stewart, Sumner, Trousdale, Williamson, and Wilson counties

Northwest Tennessee Human Resource Agency

731-587-2903

www.nwthrtransit.org

Serving Benton, Carroll, Crockett, Dyer, Gibson, Henry, Lake, Obion, and Weakley counties

South Central Tennessee Development District

931-381-2040

www.sctdd.org

Serving Bedford, Coffee, Franklin, Giles, Hickman, Lawrence, Lewis, Lincoln, Marshall, Maury, Moore, Perry, and Wayne counties



**Southeast Tennessee Human Resource Agency
(SETHRA)**

423-949-2191

www.sethra.us

Serving Bledsoe, Bradley, Grundy, Marion, McMinn,
Meigs, Polk, Rhea, and Sequatchie counties

Southwest Human Resource Agency

731-989-5111

www.swhra.org

Serving Chester, Decatur, Hardeman, Hardin, Haywood,
Henderson, Madison, and McNairy counties

Upper Cumberland Human Resource Agency

931-528-1127

www.uchra.org

Serving Cannon, Clay, Cumberland, DeKalb, Fentress,
Jackson, Macon, Overton, Pickett, Putnam, Smith, Van
Buren, Warren, and White counties

**Tennessee Area Agencies on
Aging and Disability**

These agencies can provide information on
transportation options for seniors in their area.
Call 1-866-836-6678 or use the local numbers below.

Aging Commission of the Mid-South

Memphis

901-324-6333

<http://agingcommission.org>

East Tennessee Area

Knoxville

865-691-2551

www.ethra.org

First Tennessee Area

Johnson City

423-928-0224

www.ftaaa.org



**Area Agency on Aging and Disability,
Aging and Disability Resource Connection**

Nashville

615-255-1010

www.gnrcaaad.org

Northwest Tennessee Area

Martin

731-587-4213

www.nwtddhra.org/index2.htm

South Central Tennessee Area

Columbia

931-381-2040

www.sctdd.org

Southeast Tennessee Area

Chattanooga

423-266-5781

<http://www.setaaad.org>

Southwest Tennessee Area

Jackson

731-668-6403

www.swtdd.org/swaaad

Upper Cumberland Area

Cookeville

931-432-4111

www.uchra.com

Other Agencies

Council on Aging of Greater Nashville

615-353-4235

www.councilonaging-midtn.org

**Knoxville/Knox County Community
Action Committee**

865-524-0319

www.knoxcac.org/kc_transit/transindex.html

Tennessee Coalition for the Enhancement of Senior Drivers

Federal Highway Administration

Tennessee Commission on Aging and Disability

Tennessee Department of Health

Tennessee Department of Safety

Tennessee Department of Transportation

Tennessee Governor's Highway Safety Office

Metropolitan Nashville Transportation Licensing Commission

Meharry Medical College

AAA Auto Club South

AARP

Council on Aging of Greater Nashville

Tennessee Regional Safety Council

3M Corporation



Paid for by the Tennessee Governor's Highway Safety Office



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