

Senior Drivers Not Making Vehicle Adjustments That Can Improve Safety

Nearly 90 percent of older drivers haven't made inexpensive adaptations to their vehicles that could improve safety and extend their time behind the wheel, according to new research from the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety.

Common vehicle adaptations like pedal extensions, seat cushions and steering wheel covers can help improve safety by reducing a senior driver's crash risk. Seniors aged 65 and over are more than twice as likely as younger drivers to be killed when involved in a crash. AAA urges older drivers to consider making the necessary adaptations to their vehicles in order to reduce crash risk and extend the time they can continue to drive.

"While many seniors are considered to be safe drivers, they are also the most vulnerable," said Dr. David Yang, executive director of the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety. "Our research suggests that most senior drivers are not taking advantage of simple and inexpensive features like steering wheel covers that can greatly improve their safety and the safety of others on the road."

The research brief, *In-Vehicle Technologies, Vehicle Adaptations, and Older Drivers: Use, Learning, and Perceptions* is the first phase in the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety's groundbreaking Longitudinal Research on Aging Drivers (LongROAD) project. Researchers are currently engaged in generating the largest and most comprehensive senior driver database in existence. This critical information will support in-depth research to better understand the risks and transportation needs of our aging population.

For this phase of the study, researchers investigated 12 vehicle adaptations and found that fewer than nine percent of senior drivers reported using any of the devices in their vehicles. Some of the inexpensive devices that can be purchased and put to use in new or existing vehicles are:

Vehicle Device	Potential Safety Impact
Cushions and seat pads	Improves line of sight and can help alleviate back or hip pain
Convex/multifaceted mirrors	Improves visibility and minimizes blind spots
Pedal extension	Helps drivers obtain a safe distance from the steering wheel/airbag and optimize visibility
Steering wheel covers	Improves grip for drivers with arthritic hand joints
Hand controls	Allows the driver to perform all vehicle maneuvers and functions without the use of lower extremities

Choosing the right features and working with a trained technician is imperative to safety behind the wheel. Of those drivers who have a device, almost 90 percent reported that they did not work with a trained professional to install the modification, a key recommendation by both the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA). AAA urges drivers to consult with a trained technician to guide them in making adjustments to their vehicle.

"When an ache or pain begins hindering driving ability, many older drivers are able to continue driving safely after making a few adjustments," says Elin Schold Davis, project coordinator of the

American Occupational Therapy Association's Older Driver Initiative. "Occupational therapy practitioners trained in driving rehabilitation are especially valuable in connecting the dots between medical challenges that can affect driving and the appropriate equipment and adaptations needed to remain safely independent in the vehicle."

Vehicle adaptations also benefit seniors' mental health by extending their time on the road. Previous research from the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety shows that seniors who have stopped driving are almost two times more likely to suffer from depression and nearly five times more likely to enter a long-term care facility than those who remain behind the wheel.

In the LongROAD study, more than 70 percent of senior drivers had experienced health conditions that impact muscles and bones such as arthritis, hip/knee replacement and joint pains. Some seniors in the study reduced their driving due to these conditions. The installation of certain devices like steering wheel covers can help lessen the impact of arthritis while larger mirrors and assistive devices on seats can help with limited neck mobility.

"Older drivers have the opportunity to take advantage of simple and inexpensive vehicle adaptations to make them more comfortable and safer behind the wheel," said Amy Stracke, managing director of traffic safety advocacy for AAA – The Auto Club Group. "These adaptations can help seniors drive safer and longer."

AAA is promoting the report in partnership with the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) to support Older Driver Safety Awareness Week. AAA and AOTA worked in collaboration with the American Society on Aging and AARP to develop [CarFit](#) to help senior drivers better utilize the features and technologies in their vehicles. The community-based program allows trained professionals to conduct a quick, yet comprehensive 12-point check of a senior's personal vehicle and make recommendations for needed adjustments or adaptations. Older drivers can sign up for an event [online](#). AAA also offers the [Smart Features for Older Drivers tool](#), which can help senior drivers identify inexpensive devices and vehicle features that optimize their comfort and safety.

About LongROAD: Recognizing that lifestyle changes, along with innovative technologies and medical advancements will have a significant impact on the driving experiences of the baby boomer generation, the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety has launched a ground-breaking, multi-year research program to more fully understand the driving patterns and trends of older drivers in the United States. The LongROAD (Longitudinal Research on Aging Drivers) study is the largest and most comprehensive senior driver database on senior drivers incorporating 2,990 participants. It will support in-depth studies of senior driving and mobility to better understand risks and develop effective countermeasures.