



Work on 'driving fitness' and drive longer; Seniors must make physical and mental changes to stay behind the wheel

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There's nothing like the topic of driving to get older adults interested.

About 140 attendees packed into a Lunch and Learn seminar to discuss *At the Wheel: Boomers and Beyond*, presented by the Ottawa Seniors Transportation Committee of the Council on Aging of Ottawa on Kilborn Place.

The speaker was Dr. **Frank Knoefel** of Bruyère Continuing Care, who discussed the physical and cognitive abilities needed to drive. "With aging, each driver will come to a point where their driving ability will fall below a safe level of driving ability," he said. "Driving is a privilege, not a right."

There were lots of questions and comments after his talk. A woman pointed out she now drives a lot more - not less - than she used to, because her husband who loved driving died six years ago. A man wondered whether men and women decline differently.

They asked how new cars with all the new technology will affect senior driving. "Learning all that new technology is hard," he said. "I do believe the auto industry is trying to accommodate aging drivers. It will change the dynamics for sure."

A woman trading in her 14-year-old car for a new one was concerned about that new technology. "Learning something new is the best thing you can do for your brain," Knoefel said.

And the best medicine you can take for anything, he said, is physical exercise. "It's the best thing you can do for your brain right now.

"We need all of our brain to be working well in order to drive," he said. "Left turns in traffic require most of our processing power. Executive functioning is used to plan all the trip variables. Driving is the ultimate multi-tasking thing we do - 12 things at once, like speed, orientation, predicting others' actions."

You have to process it all - "see, assess, act, evaluate and correct" - quickly and safely.

And you need to be healthy physically as well - with mobility to shoulder check and move your hands and legs,

eyes to see, ears to hear feedback from cars around us.

“Breathing is harder, joints aren’t moving as fast, brain cells are dying. There is a lot going against us as we age.”

It’s a vicious circle for older drivers, said Knoefel. “People who drive less are less confident.”

A pamphlet put out by the Transportation Committee of the Council on Aging devotes half of it to staying independent without your own four wheels. The other half has suggestions for driving longer, working on driving fitness and learning to compensate.

The pamphlet mentions Car Fit, a program initiated by the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists. They suggest tips to improve the fit between you and your car, and features that need to be adjusted properly for comfort and safety.

Check www.caot.ca/CarFitCanada or call 613-523-2268 to find a CarFit event.

If you’re thinking of buying a new car, www.seniordriving.aaa.com can help you find a vehicle with the right features for you.

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Illustration: Louise Rachlis / Our physical and cognitive abilities change as we age, and these changes can affect our driving skills. Examining and improving the fit between driver and car is one way to help compensate for declining skills.;