



# Driver Safety for Tennessee Seniors

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A resource for family members  
and caregivers





## Is It Time to Stop Driving?

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At what age is a person too old to drive safely? It's a sensitive issue, because like everyone else, older adults depend on driving to maintain their independence and keep doing all the things they need and want to do.

Most seniors are safe drivers. Their safety belt usage is high, and they have low rates of violations for speeding, reckless driving, and alcohol-related incidents. However, as they age, their risk of being involved in an accident increases with each year of age. 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.

Many seniors voluntarily limit their driving under certain circumstances, particularly when they realize their vision has changed and they don't see as well at night or in bad weather. Others, however, may be reluctant to stop driving because the thought of losing their independence is too threatening, and they may fear becoming isolated, lonely, and dependent on family or friends. In addition, any changes in vision or physical function may have happened slowly over time so they don't realize they're no longer as safe behind the wheel. The task of bringing up this delicate issue may then fall to a family member, friend, or caregiver.



It's estimated that by 2020, 54 million Americans will be over age 65, and many of them will still be driving. The question of whether they should limit their driving or stop altogether is one that more and more seniors and their families will face. Conversations about this important safety issue are not easy. Your parent or relative may resent discussing the topic or resist admitting to any problems with driving. The question needs to be handled with tact and diplomacy.

## A Gradual Approach

It's best to plan ahead and discuss the issue before it becomes critical so you can prepare your family member for the day when he or she needs to stop driving. You might decide on a gradual approach so that the person accepts increasing restrictions on driving over a period of time. At first, for example, he or she may decide to avoid driving at night or during rush hour. Later on you may decide together that it's best to limit driving to familiar nearby destinations such as stores, church, and friends' homes. These gradual levels of restriction will ease the driver into the time when it becomes clear that driving should be stopped altogether.

It's also important to let the person know that he or she will still be able to get around. You can outline the alternative methods of transportation that are available,

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including any family members or friends who are willing to help out as well as other private and public sources of help. See the Resources section at the end for an overview of alternative transportation resources in Tennessee.

This booklet is intended to help you through the process of discussing this important subject with your family member. It outlines the issues involved and offers advice and resources to help you deal with what is often a difficult and challenging milestone in a family's life.





## It's All About Safety

The National Highway Transportation Safety Administration estimates that by 2025, 40 percent of fatal crashes will be due to age-related difficulties, with visual and cognitive impairments as major contributing factors.

The decline in physical and mental functioning that happens as people age is the main reason that driving becomes riskier for older people. These are some of the most important factors:

### Vision Changes

Vision typically begins to decline around age 45, and some of the reasons for the change aren't correctable with eyeglasses. Older drivers need more light to see clearly, and it takes them longer to adjust to changing light conditions and to recover from glare. It also takes them longer to adjust their focus when looking from the dashboard to the road, and a decline in depth perception makes it more difficult to tell how fast other cars are moving.

### Physical Fitness and Health

Older drivers may have conditions such as arthritis that cause stiffness or pain in the neck, shoulders, arms, hands, or ankles. That may reduce mobility, making it difficult to turn the head and check behind the car when backing up or passing, to move quickly when they need to press the accelerator or brake, or even to turn the steering wheel.

## Mental Skills

The brain processes information more slowly with aging, and reaction times are 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 may help compensate for any slowing in their reactions.

Unfortunately, Alzheimer's disease and other types of dementia affect many older Americans today. The decline in cognitive skills that accompanies these conditions means that driving becomes very risky. Often the driver will recognize that he or she is no longer safe on the road and will voluntarily stop driving. If that's not the case, the decision on when to stop driving becomes more difficult, and it may be wise to include a professional such as the family doctor in the process.

## Medications

Both prescription and nonprescription drugs can affect the ability to drive safely. Many medications cause drowsiness, slower reaction times, reduced energy levels, and other effects that interfere with driving. Medicines to be particularly concerned about include antidepressants, pain relievers, sleeping pills, antihistamines, and decongestants. A doctor or pharmacist can help the older driver understand which medications are likely to interfere with safe driving and that it's better to avoid getting behind the wheel when taking these drugs.

## Adaptations

The question of whether it's still safe to drive isn't necessarily an either/or proposition. Although senior drivers may be affected by poorer vision and slower reaction time, they can take steps to sharpen their driving skills, follow certain precautions when driving, and adapt their vehicles to provide greater safety. Following are some online sources of information about assessing and improving one's driving skills.

### AARP

[www.aarp.org/families/driver\\_safety](http://www.aarp.org/families/driver_safety)

### AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety

[www.seniordrivers.org](http://www.seniordrivers.org)

[www.aaafoundation.org](http://www.aaafoundation.org)

### American Association of Occupational Therapists

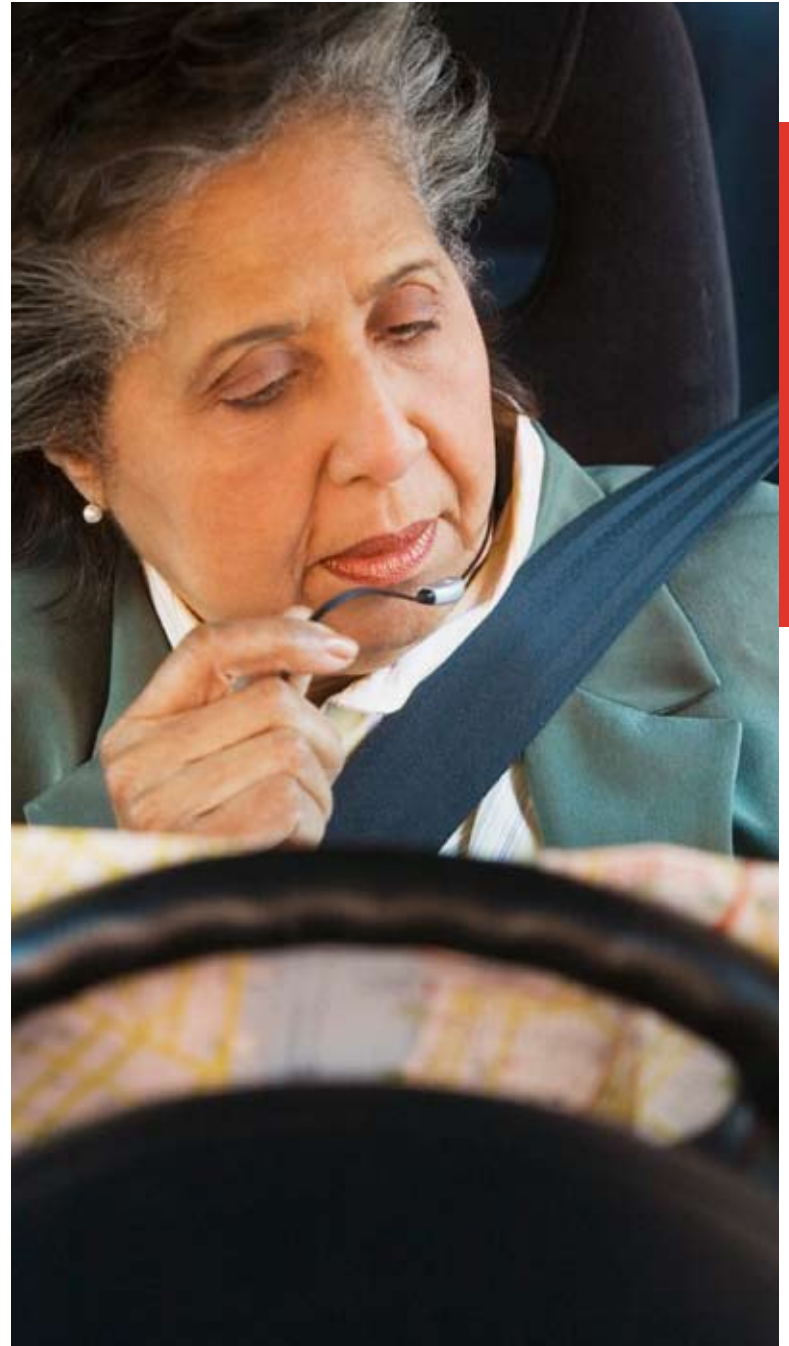
[www.aota.org/olderdriver](http://www.aota.org/olderdriver)

### CarFit

A program called CarFit can help senior drivers check how well their car “fits” them in terms of enhancing their safety and comfort while they drive. This assessment is done by a trained technician and takes about 30 minutes. [www.car-fit.org](http://www.car-fit.org)

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## An Ongoing Conversation

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Unless an older driver's skills deteriorate suddenly due to illness or loss of function, it's best to have an ongoing conversation about the issue. If possible, it's a good idea to begin talking about it well before the person needs to stop driving. Perhaps he or she has already started setting limits such as not driving at night, and that can lead the way to a discussion of the other changes that lie ahead and how to prepare for them.

It's important to be sensitive to your family member's feelings and concerns. A parent may resist giving up control to an adult child because the parent is used to being the one who makes the decisions. Be supportive, and try to enlist the driver's cooperation in coming to a mutual agreement so that he or she doesn't feel a total loss of control. Explain that the primary issue is one of safety, both for the driver and others.

## Be Prepared

Be sure to know the facts ahead of time so you can discuss the issues involved, such as how the physical and mental changes that come with aging can affect driving. Explain that having an auto accident can be much more harmful for an older person than for a younger one because of their greater physical frailty. There are also financial considerations: having an accident can be very expensive because of medical costs and car repairs.

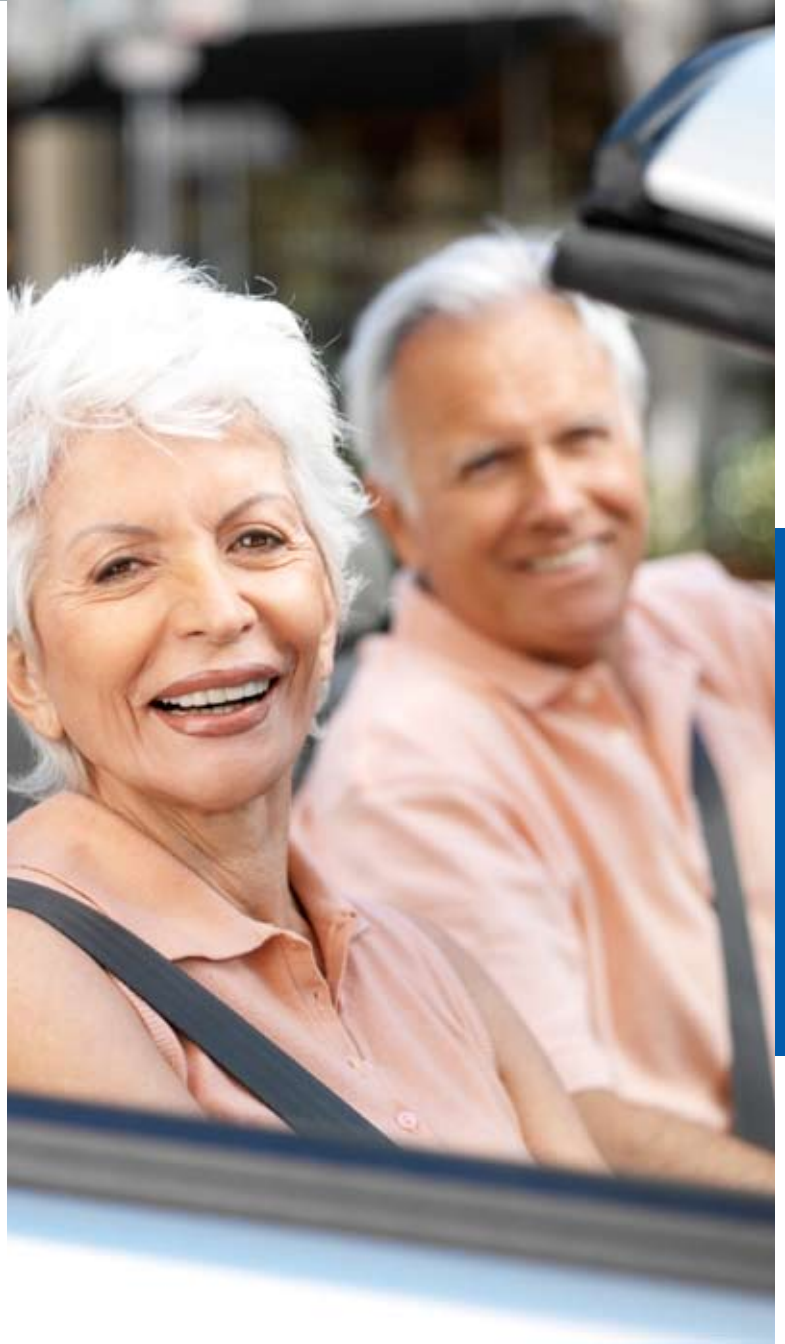
There are a number of good resources available to help you with this process. One is called *Family Conversations with Older Drivers*, available on the Hartford Financial Services website ([www.thehartford.com/talkwitholderdrivers](http://www.thehartford.com/talkwitholderdrivers)). It discusses issues such as which family member should have the conversation with the older driver and how to prepare for it, and even gives conversation openers that can start a discussion off on the right foot. The information on the site is based on research conducted with older drivers themselves, so it has some good insights into effective ways to talk about the issue.

The Hartford site also has a special section on Alzheimer's disease and driving ([www.thehartford.com/alzheimers](http://www.thehartford.com/alzheimers)). It discusses how dementia affects driving and how to deal with the challenges. For additional information and assistance, call your local chapter of the Alzheimer's Association.

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*The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety reports that seniors over 85 and teenagers have much higher deadly accident rates than middle-aged adults.*



WHEN TO STOP DRIVING



## When It's Time to Stop Driving

Age alone isn't the main determining factor in decisions about when to stop driving. Some people can drive safely into their 80s if they are physically and mentally healthy. It's important to assess each individual's ability to function safely on the road.

There are a number of resources available to help older drivers evaluate their own skills, including online assessments. But it's also important for family members or other caregivers to come to their own judgment about the driver's capabilities. It's a good idea to ride along with the driver occasionally and check for signs that driving has become a problem.

### Warning Signs

- Nervousness while driving. Has the driver's confidence diminished so that he or she feels nervous and uncertain when behind the wheel? Is the person exhausted or upset when arriving home?
- More tickets or warnings. Has the driver been issued more citations 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. Has the driver had an increased number of "fender-benders" or more serious accidents in the recent past? Are there more dents or scratches in the car? Has he or she had more-frequent close calls while driving?

- Getting lost or confused. Does the driver get lost more frequently, even in familiar places? That is a particular indication that cognitive skills are declining.
- Poor driving skills. Does the driver tend to go too fast or too slow, or confuse the gas and brake pedals? Does he or she have a hard time staying in the proper lane or navigating turns?
- Deteriorating physical condition. Has the person suffered a stroke, heart attack, or other illness that might make driving difficult because of anxiety, weakness, confusion, or pain?

## The Decision

At a certain point it becomes clear that your family member can no longer drive safely. It's helpful if you've prepared for the day by having several conversations on the topic and discussing the resources available to help the person maintain independence.

Some older drivers may exhibit resistance or deny altogether that they are unsafe behind the wheel. In that case you may need to take other steps:

- Enlist the help of a trusted friend or other relative who might be able to help the person accept the decision.
- Ask the driver's physician if he or she is willing to intervene. Sometimes framing the issue as a matter of health can be more acceptable to a driver. Although doctors can't assess driving skills, they can judge whether physical or cognitive deterioration has made driving unsafe. They may be able to refer the patient to a local driver evaluation program for a professional assessment. They may also submit a medical form to the Tennessee Department of Safety outlining their concerns (see next page).

- A family member or friend may decide to send a letter to the Tennessee Department of Safety, Driver Services Division, listing their specific concerns about the person's ability to drive safely. This form must be accompanied by a medical form signed by the driver's physician. The Department will determine whether the person needs to take a special driver's examination. Depending on the results of this test, special restrictions or the suspension of the driver's license may be imposed. See [www.state.tn.us/safety](http://www.state.tn.us/safety) or the Tennessee Code Annotated 55-50-505.
- To protect the driver, as well as the general public, you might need to take away the car keys, disable the auto, or even remove it from the premises. It's not a task that anyone likes, but sometimes it's the only option.

## Alternatives

It's also important to remind the person of the alternative transportation options available. Ideally this is a topic you've already discussed. Some possibilities are:

- Public transit systems
- Specialized transit (e.g., senior center or hospital shuttle)
- Community transportation services
- Taxi services
- Family and friends.

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

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*Alternative transportation resources include public transit systems and community services such as volunteer driver programs or community minibuses and vans.*



## Public Transportation Resources in Tennessee

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These transportation resources in Tennessee can help nondrivers stay mobile. Call them or check their websites for information on special assistance available to seniors.

## Urban transit systems

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**Bristol Tennessee Transit System (BTTS)**  
423-989-5586  
[www.bristoltn.org/Transportation.cfm](http://www.bristoltn.org/Transportation.cfm)

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**Chattanooga Area Regional Transportation Authority (ARTA)**  
423-629-1411  
[www.gocarta.org](http://www.gocarta.org)

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**Clarksville Transit System (CTS)**  
931-553-2430  
[www.cityofclarksville.com/transit/index.asp](http://www.cityofclarksville.com/transit/index.asp)

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**Cleveland Urban Area Transit System**  
423-478-1396  
[www.cityofcleveland.com](http://www.cityofcleveland.com)

**Franklin Transit Authority**  
615-790-0604  
[www.franklinrolleys.org](http://www.franklinrolleys.org)

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**Gatlinburg Mass Transit System**  
865-436-3897  
[www.ci.gatlinburg.tn.us](http://www.ci.gatlinburg.tn.us)

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**Jackson Transit Authority (JTA)**  
731-423-0200  
[www.ridejta.com](http://www.ridejta.com)

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**Johnson City Transit System (JCTS)**  
423-929-7119  
[www.johnsoncitytransit.org](http://www.johnsoncitytransit.org)

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**Kingsport Area Transit Service (KATS)**  
423-224-2612  
[www.kingsporttransit.org](http://www.kingsporttransit.org)

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**Knoxville Area Transit (KAT)**  
865-215-7800  
[www.katbus.com](http://www.katbus.com)

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**Lakeway Area Transit (Morristown)**  
423-581-6277  
[www.ethrapublictransit.org](http://www.ethrapublictransit.org)

**Memphis Area Transit Authority (MATA)**

901-722-7100

[www.matatransit.com](http://www.matatransit.com)

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**City of Murfreesboro (Rover)**

615-893-6441

[www.murfreesborotn.gov](http://www.murfreesborotn.gov)

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**Nashville (MTA)**

615-880-3970

[www.nashvillemta.org](http://www.nashvillemta.org)

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**City of Oak Ridge**

865-482-2785

[www.oakridgepublictransit.org](http://www.oakridgepublictransit.org)

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**Pigeon Forge Fun Time Trolleys (PFTS)**

865-453-6444

[www.pigeonforgetrolley.org](http://www.pigeonforgetrolley.org)

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**Regional Transportation Authority (RTA)**

615-882-8833

[rta@gnrc.org](mailto:rta@gnrc.org)

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**City of Sevierville**

865-453-5504

[www.seviervilletn.org](http://www.seviervilletn.org)

## Rural Transit Systems

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

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**East Tennessee Human Resource Agency**

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

[www.ethrapublictransit.org](http://www.ethrapublictransit.org)

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

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**First Tennessee Human Resource Agency**

423-461-8233

[www.fthra.org](http://www.fthra.org) or [www.nettrans.org](http://www.nettrans.org)

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

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**Hancock County Rural Transportation**

423-733-2183

[www.hancockcountytransit.org](http://www.hancockcountytransit.org)

Serving Hancock County

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**Delta Human Resource Agency**

901-476-5226

[www.deltahra.org](http://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

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**Northwest Tennessee Human Resource Agency**

731-587-2903  
www.nwthratransit.org

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

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**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

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**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

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**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

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These agencies can provide information on transportation options for seniors in their areas. 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](http://www.ethra.org)

### **First Tennessee Area**

Johnson City  
423-928-0224  
[www.ftaaa.org](http://www.ftaaa.org)

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

Nashville  
615-255-1010  
[www.gnrcaaad.org](http://www.gnrcaaad.org)

### **Northwest Tennessee Area**

Martin  
731-587-4213  
[www.nwtdhira.org](http://www.nwtdhira.org)

### **South Central Tennessee Area**

Columbia  
931-381-2040  
[www.sctdd.org](http://www.sctdd.org)

### **Southeast Tennessee Area**

Chattanooga  
423-266-5781  
[www.setaad.org](http://www.setaad.org)

### **Southwest Tennessee Area**

Jackson  
731-668-6403  
[www.swtd.org/swaaaad](http://www.swtd.org/swaaaad)

### **Upper Cumberland Area**

Cookeville  
931-432-4111  
[www.uchra.com](http://www.uchra.com)

## Other Agencies

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### **Council on Aging of Greater Nashville**

615-353-4235  
[www.councilonaging-midtn.org](http://www.councilonaging-midtn.org)

### **Knoxville/Knox County Community Action Committee**

865-524-0319  
[www.knoxcac.org/kc\\_transit/transindex.html](http://www.knoxcac.org/kc_transit/transindex.html)

## Tennessee Coalition for the Enhancement of Senior Drivers

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### **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**



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