

Road reminders can help both younger and older drivers

By Tara Marion

To ensure their own safety, all drivers need to know their strengths and weaknesses, but two groups in particular—those in their early years of driving and those in their late years of driving—need to remember rules that are especially pertinent to their circumstances.

For example, “The most cited problems of older drivers include the failure to yield, failure to observe signs and signals, careless crossing of intersections, changing lanes without due regard for others, improper backing, and driving too slowly,” according to AAA Michigan’s booklet, “55 Plus: Check Your Own Performance.”

The problems unfortunately arise do to the natural course of aging. Senior drivers find themselves maneuvering down roadways with deteriorating vision, reflexes, flexibility and hearing.

To drive safely, seniors must understand their limitations and use alternative measures to compensate. For instance, if crossing busy roads or yielding to traffic is a problem—and it is especially intimidating when a high-speed road or highway—AAA offers the simple solution of simply avoiding driving during rush-hour traffic.

When it comes to failure to observe signs and signals (generally due to deteriorating vision and/or changes in driving and highways regulations), AAA offers, “Sometimes just knowing what the shapes of signs and symbols mean can help you anticipate their message.”

Changing lanes without due regard for others means not signaling and/or checking blind spots. Forgetfulness, unawareness or physical pain (such as arthritis) are reasons why senior citizens many not communicate their intentions to other drivers.

Tips to help you change lanes properly include: Drive with a partner to act as co-pilot whenever possible. Install extra-wide rearview mirrors and side mirrors to decrease your blind spots. (Note that side mirrors make objects appear smaller and further away than they really are.)

You could also as your physician about medications and exercises that might improve your flexibility, so that you can better look over your shoulder to view traffic coming up behind you. Finally, you can simply make a concerted effort to be aware of your driving habits and to always look before changing lanes.

To eliminate unsafe driving practices altogether, utilize all of the tips above and even call around to find out if a senior driver refresher course is available in your area.

Bust just as older drivers discover their age seems to affect their ability and confidence on the road, young drivers are affected likewise.

A summer’s worth of driver’s education hardly seems like enough training for a lifetime of driving ahead of them, but then again, when teen-agers enroll in the course, education is not their personal priority. “Their greatest urge is to get behind the wheel of a car,” said Don Jobe, a driver’s training instructor at Portage Public Schools.

Jobe said that the most difficult part of his job is instilling in young people a sense of responsibility. “The hardest part is getting through to them the idea that they, as the operator, are responsible for everybody in their car, including themselves, and otherson the street.”

Teen-agers also have a tendency to have tunnel vision. Jobe will ask them what the speed limit is after having passed a sign, but they don't know because they didn't see it—which is probably one of the reasons why a lot of teen-agers get speeding tickets.

Another weakness of young drivers is that it's difficult for them to concentrate on more than one thing at a time. "You ask them to concentrate on speed, and they'll just stare at the speedometer instead of just glancing at it," Jobe said. "You ask them to make a shoulder glance, and they turn around and stare."

To improve teen-agers' driving, parents need to set an example with their own driving practices. "Every parent wants their kid to come back alive when they get the car out—and if they really did, they'd be setting the example," Jobe said.

But young or old or in between, every driver has his or her strengths and weaknesses. But it is the wise driver who understands this and finds ways, through further learning and practice, to compensate for those individual weaknesses—and thus, ensure collective safety.