

Driving Assessments and Parkinson's

Driving and Parkinson's is a complicated issue, and the system used for driving assessments can be difficult to navigate. MICHELLE WOOTTON, our Client Services Officer, shares some of the common questions about driving and Parkinson's which we receive through our free information Help phone line – and the answers.

Why would someone with Parkinson's have to sit a driving assessment?

When you are first diagnosed with Parkinson's, it is a legal requirement to disclose your condition to VicRoads. After you or someone else notifies VicRoads of your medical condition, they will conduct a medical review, which will take into account:

- The medical report from your doctor
- Assessing **Fitness to Drive** Guidelines
- Advice from VicRoads medical advisors
- Eyesight and specialist reports
- Your treatment plan and ability to manage the condition
- Reports from police and other third parties

If the above is not sufficient for VicRoads to make a decision about your ability to drive safely, they may request that you sit a driving test. This may be conducted by a VicRoads driving assessor or an occupational therapist.

Why are assessments conducted by an occupational therapist, and not VicRoads?

The VicRoads standard driving test is designed for inexperienced drivers. It does not assess how a medical condition or the deterioration of driving skills affects the ability to drive safely.

Victorian law allows qualified occupational therapists to conduct driver assessments.

Occupational therapists (OT), like doctors or optometrists, are independent specialists working in the field of health care. **They do not work for, and are not paid by VicRoads.**

Occupational therapists are health professionals who assist people with physical or intellectual disabilities to resume normal daily activities. The role of the OT driving assessor is to help the client to continue driving, so they will develop strategies or provide advice about aids or modifications to the vehicle to overcome any barriers. The OT may suggest particular conditions be placed on the licence for the client's safety, such as only driving in daylight hours, during non-peak times and/or within a certain radius of their home.

If a test is conducted by a VicRoads driving assessor, they will be as strict as if the client were sitting their licence for the first time, and will not take into account the person's health condition or be able to provide advice about aids or vehicle modifications.

What can I expect from an OT driver assessment?

1. A medical assessment

You will be asked to provide a medical report from your own doctor or specialist which shows that you are medically fit. If you have eyesight problems, you may also have to provide an eyesight report. Being medically fit does not exempt you from undergoing a driver assessment, as your doctor cannot assess your driving skills.

2. An off-road assessment

The occupational therapist will ask you about your driving history, test your understanding of road law, and assess your physical, visual, sensory and thinking abilities. This may take up to two hours. This assessment evaluates your understanding of safe driving, any necessary vehicle modifications or licence conditions and determines the requirements for your on-road assessment, for example:

- The type of vehicle (e.g. automatic or manual)
- Any vehicle modifications
- Where the assessment should be conducted.

3. An on-road assessment

The assessment will occur in a dual controlled car. A driving instructor will be present during your assessment to maintain the safety of the vehicle and give route instructions. The occupational therapist and the driving instructor are the only people permitted in the vehicle. It will take about an hour and a half (of which about one hour will involve you driving).

The main areas observed will be:

- Physical limitations
- Judgement and ability to adjust to traffic situations
- Reacting appropriately to traffic
- Abiding by road laws.

If vehicle modifications are required (eg. Steering aid, left foot accelerator), the equipment is fitted and trialed to ensure you can safely use it.

After the assessment, the OT will send through the report to VicRoads, who will advise over the phone if you can retain a full licence or whether it will be made conditional or cancelled. If your licence is made conditional or cancelled, you have the right to appeal and re-sit the test.

What costs are involved with an Occupational Therapy driving assessment?

There are no current subsidy schemes or Medicare rebates available, but some OT's may provide a discount to health care card holders/pensioners at their own discretion. It is often cheaper to get the test done through a public rehabilitation centre or movement disorder clinic with a specialist OT driving rehabilitation program. The OT must conduct the assessment in a dual control car. A driving instructor will be present during your assessment to maintain the safety of the vehicle and give route instructions.

The fees charged include an off and on-road assessment, plus the costs involved for a driving instructor and the use of their dual control car. After the assessment, the OT submits a report to VicRoads with the results of the test. VicRoads do not charge any additional fees for the medical review.

Some OT's will charge a set fee, while others will break it down into separate costs for the off and on-road assessments, plus charge extra for the driving instructor.

You can expect to pay anywhere between \$160 and \$608 (all-inclusive) for your initial driving assessment. You should not incur any fees directly from VicRoads in addition to this.

Parkinson's Victoria encourages clients to contact a few OT's in their area to find their cheapest option. Unfortunately clients in regional areas may have limited or no choice.

An up-to-date list of OT driving assessors can be found on the Parkinson's Victoria 'Help Finder' website under the 'Driving & Transport' section.

How can clients make a complaint about the fees associated with an OT driving assessment?

Unfortunately, the peak bodies associated with OT driving assessments, VicRoads and OT Australia Victoria, do not exert much influence or responsibility in this area, and both have official disclaimers:

"VicRoads is not responsible for the regulation of occupational therapists. If any complaint alleges that conduct was inappropriate or unprofessional, the matter will be referred to OT AUSTRALIA Victoria, which will endeavour to resolve the matter by investigation, mediation, or referral to the Health Services Commissioner."

That being said, the disclaimer from OT Australia (Victoria) states:

"Fees charged by OTs are a commercial matter between the member and their clients and are outside OT AUSTRALIA Victoria's jurisdiction. OT AUSTRALIA Victoria is not in a position to investigate or handle complaints made against occupational therapists who are not members of the Association. Complaints against these occupational therapists need to be referred directly to the Health Services Commissioner."

Why are some clients required to have an annual review of their driving ability?

According to the '**Assessing Fitness to Drive**' criteria, if a person has a neuromuscular condition (Multiple Sclerosis, Parkinson's, Peripheral Neuropathy, etc) that has progressed so as to impair driving, the criteria for an unconditional licence are not met.

A **conditional licence** may be granted by VicRoads, taking into account the opinion of the treating doctor/GP, and the nature of the driving task. A conditional licence will also be subject to "**at least annual review**", taking into account:

- Response to treatments
- Report of a driver assessor and
- Modifications to the vehicle.

A conditional licence may specify that the client is only able to drive under particular driving conditions (eg. only during daylight hours or non-peak times of day) or within a certain radius (eg. within 5kms from home).

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To see the complete newsletter, click here:

www.parkinsonsvic.org.au/about-ps/publications.htm#signposts

For more information about Parkinson's and driving, or if you have any question in relation to Parkinson's, please contact Parkinson's Victoria.