

Staying in the Driving Seat

Bridget McCall provides a checklist for all people with Parkinson's who drive

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Driving is a very important part of everyday life, promoting independence and providing a means to get to work, meet friends and enjoy leisure activities. It is not surprising therefore that one of the commonest questions people diagnosed with Parkinson's ask is how the condition will affect their ability to drive.

Although some people do find that their driving is affected by their symptoms and the medication they take, many others continue to drive safely for years after diagnosis. A doctor's advice should always be sought and any legal obligations complied with, but even when difficulties arise, these can often be overcome through the use of equipment, adaptations and particular techniques that make driving easier.

Checklist

1. Legal obligations

These will depend on the laws in the country you live in, but those likely to be applicable in all European countries are:

- a. Notifying your national driver and vehicle licensing body of your diagnosis. They will advise you of the steps you need to take to retain your driving licence. This may involve contacting your doctor to confirm your fitness to drive, a medical exam or driving test. Some countries may issue a licence for a fixed term, usually renewable provided your ability hasn't deteriorated sufficiently to make you unfit to drive.
- b. Informing your insurance company. You should tell the company of any health change that may affect your driving. In most countries it is an offence under road traffic legislation to make a false statement or withhold information for the purposes of obtaining a certificate of motor insurance. Anyone who drives when considered unfit will invalidate their insurance cover.
- c. Reporting any subsequent changes in your driving ability to the driver and vehicle licensing body and your insurance company.

2. Insurance premiums

Unfortunately some insurance companies do apply extra charges to premiums, despite the disability discrimination legislation that now exists in many European countries. If this happens to you, you should be able to find another insurer that will provide a competitive quote. Your national Parkinson's or disability organisation may have a list.

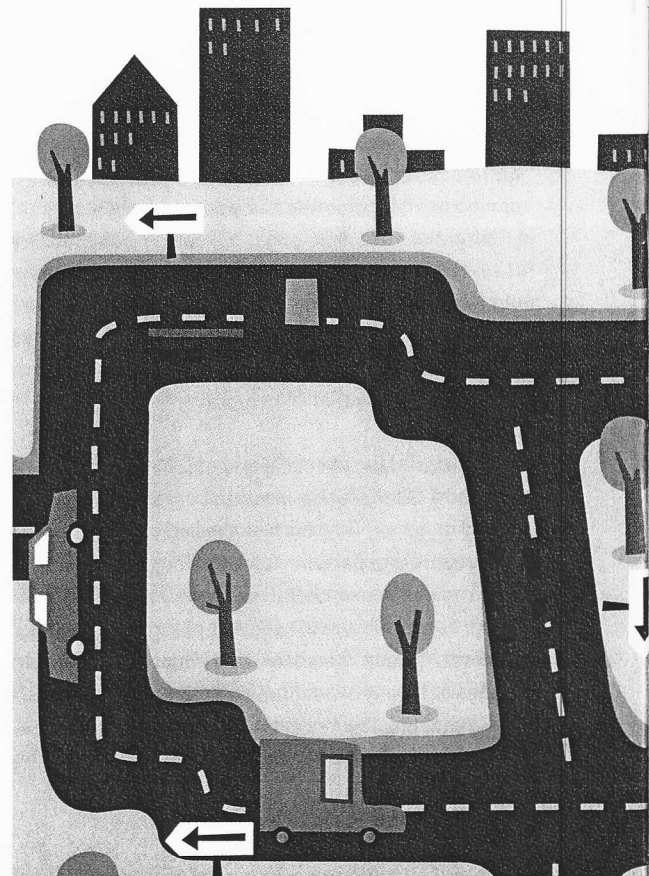
3. Vehicle tax

In some countries you may be entitled to a free tax disc if you have a disability and are receiving particular state benefits. Your local social services or welfare rights organisation can advise further.

4. Adaptations

Cars can often be adapted to make driving easier and this can also be achieved by changing to a different type of vehicle that is easier to manage. Helpful features may include:

- Adaptations specifically to suit people with disabilities
- More room inside the car to allow easier manoeuvrability
- Automatic transmission
- Power steering
- Automatic functions, e.g. electric windows, and windscreen wipers that automatically turn on when it rains
- Swivel seats
- Door handles that are easier to open and simpler hand controls
- Aids to make steering, braking or acceleration less difficult.



An occupational therapist should be able to advise you. Some countries have specialised driving and mobility centres where you can have an assessment, obtain information and try out equipment. Remember to be aware of possible future driving needs when considering a change of car or making adaptations.

In some countries financial assistance may be available to people who are in receipt of certain welfare benefits or services to help fund the purchase of a more suitable car or adaptations. Your national Parkinson's or disability organisation may be able to advise you.

5. Driving and medication

Drowsiness can be a side-effect of Parkinson's medications, but has been noted particularly with the dopamine agonists pramipexole (Mirapexin) and ropinirole (ReQuip). There have also been rare cases where people taking these medications have experienced sudden onset of sleep while driving.

Regulations regarding this issue vary, so it is important that you check with your country's regulatory body what the situation is where you live. In the UK, for example, the Driver & Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) stated that the risk of sudden onset of sleep was quite low and taking Parkinson's medication should not lead to an automatic cessation of driving. However, anyone who

experiences drowsiness should stop driving until they have discussed the problem with their doctor. Changing medication can sometimes help, but not always.

6. Parking

The EU Model Parking Card for People with Disabilities (the Blue Badge) has been adopted in many European countries. This entitles those who qualify to certain parking concessions in their own country and other parts of Europe that have the scheme. The concessions vary between countries, but usually apply whether the holder is the driver or a passenger in a car.

The motoring organisation, the Automobile Association (AA), has published a leaflet, *European Parking Card for People with Disabilities*, which explains more about using the Blue Badge in 29 European Countries. See www.theaa.com/motoring_advice/overseas/blue-badge-users.html

7. Safe driving

All drivers have a responsibility to ensure that they are medically fit to drive at all times. If you have any doubts or concerns about your ability, stop driving and seek advice from your doctor.

It is a good idea to take a mobile phone with you when you drive, so you can ask for assistance easily if you get into difficulties or have an accident.

Public transport concessions and assistance schemes

If you prefer to use public transport, there may be concessions and assistance schemes available in your country to help you. Examples include local taxi schemes and rail/bus cards. Many rail companies, airports and airlines have systems in place to help passengers with disabilities, provided this is booked in advance.

Further information

- Your national Parkinson's or disability organisation should be able to advise you further about all aspects of driving, parking, transport concessions and sources of further information and support.
- The European Disability Forum, which champions the rights of people with disabilities on a European basis, is actively campaigning for a barrier-free Europe in terms of all types of transport. See www.edf-feph.org (accessed July 2008) for more information. Many European countries have disability discrimination acts that aim to make aspects of daily living, including transport, more accessible.

