Driving with Mobility Issues: Adaptations, Risks, and Assistance

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What You Need to Know About Driving with MS

I've just received my new driver's license, valid for three years, which has taken me months to prove I'm still eligible for.

In the UK, you have to declare to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) that you have a condition such as multiple sclerosis (MS) that could affect your ability to drive. They then write to you every three years to ask questions about your condition and ask you to provide details of your neurologist or anyone else who may have evidence about your ability to drive.

This process can take months, and when you send your license back you're never entirely sure if they'll re-issue it or declare you unfit to drive.

For me, this is a scary and difficult process and I find my anxiety levels rising at every request for additional information or clarification. Inexplicably, last time they only issued my license for a year; this time I had to see my doctor to complete a further medical examination before they issued it again for three years.

It makes no sense to me and I was a bundle of nerves and defensiveness as the doctor asked me about my eyesight (which, when tested, revealed itself to be very good). I also had to talk about my mobility issues and any special controls or adaptations I've had on my vehicle to make it safe for me to drive.

I understand why they do this and realize safety is the most important thing when driving, but I find the process so stressful. My confidence is at an all-time low and I'd rather never get in the car again as I've asked myself if I ought to be driving.

Adaptations

Luckily, there are adaptations you can have to your vehicle to make it safer to drive if you have MS mobility issues .

Automatic Cars

In the UK most people drive a manual or stick shift car. I have no idea why this is — in other countries, nearly everyone drives an automatic.

Having gears you have to control manually with your feet can be hard for MSers, especially in a city where there's lots of stopping and starting. I switched to an automatic years ago, and it had such an impact on the fatigue I felt and how well I was able to control the car.

Hand Controls

These can be fitted so the accelerator and break are controlled with your right hand and the steering is controlled by your left. This way your feet needn't be involved at all. Many of my friends with MS swear by them.

I have them fitted in my car but haven't had any formal training on how to use them! I need to take my car somewhere quiet and get my head round it and I'm glad I have the option.

Assessment

Ask your MS nurse or health care team to recommend somewhere to have an assessment. They will assess your needs and see what adaptations you need to make driving easier and safer.

Cognitive Problems and Driving

MS symptoms aren't all physical — some people with MS have problems with concentration and spatial awareness that may have an impact on their ability to drive.

I never drive when I'm tired as my cognitive problems are always worse when I feel fatigued.

Benefits for Driving With MS

In the UK people who qualify for certain disability benefits can use the money they receive to lease a car and have adaptations made to the vehicle they chose. This has been a lifeline for me as I also got a hoist fitted that lifts my mobility scooter in and out of the trunk.

Consider similar programs in your area and visit websites such as the National MS Society for more details.

In the UK you can also claim for a disability badge that allows you to park in disabled parking spots and often get free parking. Look into this in your area as this is also a great "perk" to having MS and allows me much more freedom.

For me, driving is linked to my sense of freedom, independence, and sense of self. I couldn't work if I couldn't drive and I rely on my car to get around.

Although my confidence is low at the moment I need to get back in the saddle and get my mojo back or I face losing my independence altogether! If you're worried to speak to your health care team and get an assessment done.

You'll be amazed how small changes can make all the difference and there's no reason why you can't continue to drive for many years to come.