

Driving with Multiple Sclerosis



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Driving with Multiple Sclerosis

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Introduction

Driving — one of the many ways we maintain our independence — is also one of the most complex activities in our daily lives. Although symptoms associated with MS can affect the skills necessary for safe driving, adaptive automobile equipment may be an option to help you drive safely. Here we review the skills necessary for safe driving, information about driving evaluations, types of adaptive auto equipment, and Department of Motor Vehicle policies. Lastly, to help maintain your independence if driving is no longer possible, other transportation options are reviewed.

Ways in which MS symptoms may affect your driving ability and safety

A person's driving performance may be negatively affected by symptoms associated with MS. For example, cognitive changes (memory loss, decreased information processing speed and impaired visual-spatial skills) and spasticity (muscle stiffness or spasms) affect driving performance, putting the person at an increased risk for an automobile crash. In addition, your ability to drive safely may be affected if you experience any of the following:

- Difficulty getting into or out of a vehicle
- Difficulty moving your foot from gas to brake pedals
- Muscle weakness or stiffness/spasms/cramps or pain, particularly in the arms or right foot
- Loss of sensation in the feet or hands
- Impaired coordination
- Slowed reaction time
- Fatigue
- Seizures or loss of consciousness
- Blurred vision, blind spots, double vision or loss of color vision
- Cognitive problems such as short-term memory loss; disorientation while driving such as forgetting your destination, getting confused about where you are or missing exits; poor concentration; inability to multi-task; and confusion about how to turn the car on or off
- Mood changes: depression and/or problems controlling anger
- Medication side effects, such as drowsiness, difficulty concentrating and/or poor coordination and reaction time

Even if your MS symptoms seem to be mild and manageable, other indications that your driving safety may already be compromised include automobile crashes or near misses, moving violations, and the unwillingness of others to be a passenger while you are driving.

Most people with MS experience exacerbations (also called attacks or relapses). During exacerbations driving may be difficult or unsafe, but may return to normal as the exacerbation ends and symptoms improve. However, people with progressive forms of MS may experience a slow worsening of abilities that can permanently affect driving.

When your body is under increased stress, such as having the flu, your MS symptoms may be worse. In addition, symptoms can fluctuate significantly during the course of a day. Planning daily activities around these fluctuations in energy is critical to optimizing your personal safety and that of others while you are driving. It is important to talk with your healthcare provider about the best strategies for managing your fatigue effectively.

Driving evaluations

If you or others are concerned about your ability to drive, you may consider obtaining a driving evaluation. Driving evaluations help identify any challenges you may be experiencing, and the appropriate adaptive equipment to keep you safely on the road.

Driver rehabilitation clinics are located in medical centers and community based clinics. A driving evaluation is performed by a driver rehabilitation specialist (DRS). A DRS is typically an occupational

therapist with specialized training in driver rehabilitation. Since the driving evaluation is usually performed by a therapist using specialized equipment, it is more comprehensive than a typical Department of Motor Vehicle (DMV) road test.

While the length of the evaluation varies, you should expect it to last about two hours; it includes an **office-based assessment** and a **behind-the-wheel evaluation**. The office-based assessment includes a review of your medical and driving history, and a look at how MS affects your ability to perform other activities of daily living such as bathing, dressing or medication management. You will be asked about specific problems you may have with driving, any citations you have received while driving, and accidents or near misses. In addition the following will be assessed:

- Functions such as strength, range of movement, coordination, sensation and motor speed
- Vision including visual acuity, depth perception, color vision and road sign recognition
- Cognitive performance to determine how quickly your brain processes information and how MS may be affecting memory, visual searching and visual-spatial relations

If you demonstrate adequate vision, cognition and motor function during the office-based assessment, a behind-the-wheel road test will be performed, usually in the facility vehicle. The road test will generally

begin in low traffic areas and proceed to more complex or higher traffic areas. Your ability to safely operate the car will be evaluated, including:

- Ability to transfer safely in and out of the vehicle
- Ability to stow any assistive devices like a wheelchair, walker or cane
- Ability to follow the rules of the road
- Reaction time in identifying potential hazards on the road
- Reaction time maneuvering the vehicle and moving your foot back and forth between the gas and brake pedals
- Visual searching, scanning and attention abilities
- Use of good judgment before executing a maneuver (e.g., a left turn)
- Ability to multi-task
- Ability to stay within a lane and to change lanes safely
- Safety awareness while driving

Driving evaluations and training typically are not covered by health insurance. Contact your insurance provider for details.

Adaptive automobile equipment

Specialized adaptive equipment may be recommended to help you adjust for deficits that interfere with your driving:

- Hand controls to operate the gas and brake
- Spinner knob to turn the steering wheel
- Adaptive steering and/or braking that requires less effort
- High-tech driving equipment for gas, brake and steering control for those with significant physical impairments. Extensive training is required and costs may be high
- Wide angle rear view mirror, larger outside driver and passenger side mirrors and/or a multi-panel rear view mirror
- Specialized seats to ease vehicle transfers
- Lifts for stowing wheelchairs and assistive devices
- Lowered-floor vans equipped with a ramp or lift to accommodate a wheelchair
- Tie-downs to secure mobility devices

Once the driver rehabilitation specialist has recommended specific auto equipment, you will need training on how to use the equipment properly and safely. The training is usually performed in the facility vehicle. Length of training varies depending on

the type of equipment and the individual's learning style. Training generally concludes when you have demonstrated safe operation of the equipment on all types of roadways. A mobility equipment dealer can then install the adaptive equipment.

The next step is a road test at your local DMV to demonstrate your ability to use the equipment safely. In many cases, the DRS who trained you will take you to the DMV so that you can be tested in the same vehicle in which you were trained, or you can take the test in your own adapted vehicle. The DMV then indicates on your driver's license that you are required to drive with specialized auto equipment.

As with any medical condition that may affect your ability to drive, a re-evaluation of your driving skills and/or use of adaptive driving equipment may be necessary if your symptoms progress over time.

Selecting and funding specialized automobile adaptive equipment

The National Mobility Equipment Dealers Association (NMEDA) sets the industry standards and provides a list of certified dealers that sell adapted vehicles and perform mobility equipment installations. It is important to have any adaptive auto equipment installed by a certified dealer in order to ensure safety.

The cost of vehicle modifications varies greatly depending on the type of equipment. Whether you are purchasing a new vehicle or would like to add adaptive auto equipment to your existing vehicle, there are public and private opportunities for funding.

Your driver rehabilitation specialist can direct you to potential community resources that provide funding. Rebates for adaptive auto equipment may be available for a new vehicle purchase — contact the vehicle manufacturer for more information. The modifications you need may also be eligible for a tax credit - check with an accountant to see if you qualify.

For more information on funding options, visit nationalMSSociety.org/stayingmobile.

State Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) policy

States vary widely in their regulations concerning drivers with medical conditions. Most states rely on the individual driver to disclose medical conditions that may affect driving ability and safety, and failure of a driver to disclose medical conditions that might affect driving may result in legal penalties and denial of insurance claims. Although a diagnosis of MS itself does not automatically preclude you from driving, the loss of function associated with MS may affect driving skills. Each state has its own procedures for re-evaluation of driving skills or reinstating driving

privileges; this usually requires your healthcare provider to complete a medical report form clearing you medically to drive. However, if your physician is unable or unwilling to complete this medical report, a formal driving evaluation by a DRS may be an alternative. In addition, you may still be required to pass a state road test once your healthcare provider has signed a medical clearance form. You should contact your state DMV for specific information.

Keep in mind that if a medical review is required, it could take time. Be sure to apply for your renewal prior to the expiration date on your license — if you let your driver's license expire, it is unlikely that you will be provided with a temporary license to use during your medical review process. Discuss your renewal in advance with your healthcare provider so you will have quick access to your medical records if necessary.

If your license is denied or revoked, utilize the process for driving privilege appeal if necessary. Be an activist and involve your local legislators in the process so that they are aware of the challenges that individuals with MS and other chronic diseases face when navigating state agencies.

Disabled parking placards

Disabled parking is sometimes a necessity for people living with MS and the medical requirements vary by state. As a general rule, the use of any assistive device such as a wheelchair, crutches or cane would qualify a person for disabled parking. Many states also include certain cardiovascular conditions, respiratory problems and conditions that cause pain while walking or otherwise require the person to rest after walking a very short distance. Age and weakness may also be covered.

Being able to park closer to your destination can save you energy and allow you to run errands or participate in other activities. If you feel your mobility is significantly impaired and you would benefit from a placard, talk to your healthcare provider. States vary in how they administer disabled parking placards. Contact your state DMV for details.

The availability of reserved parking spaces is regulated by both federal and state laws. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) any place of business or other location that provides parking to the public must designate a number of disabled-accessible spaces that is proportionate to the total number of spaces available at the facility. If you have questions about accessible parking in the areas you frequent, or if you feel spaces are being inappropriately used, contact your local motor vehicle office for guidance.

What if it's no longer safe to drive?

It is important to recognize when you are no longer safe to perform certain activities. Just as you might plan for other circumstances associated with MS, planning for the day when driving may no longer be possible can help ease the transition. If you find yourself grieving the loss of driving, you might want to talk with a therapist. Talking with your healthcare provider may be helpful if you are having difficulty understanding why others have concerns about your driving safety.

Alternative transportation

Paratransit is a van and taxi program for people unable to independently use public transit because of a disability or disabling health condition. Since 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has required that all public transit agencies provide paratransit services to qualified people with disabilities. Paratransit services are intended for people living with disabilities regardless of age. When looking for alternatives to driving you may also consider exploring the following:

- Rent a ramp van from a mobility dealer
- Ask a friend or family member for a ride; consider offering to pay for the gas
- Take a taxi or use a ride-share app

- Ask about volunteer drivers at your local community center, place of worship or local service organization
- Check with your state agency responsible for making sure people with disabilities have transportation

Resources

National MS Society

nationalMSSociety.org/stayingmobile

1-800-344-4867

The Society has resources for finding new, used or rented accessible vehicles, and funding resources for accessible vehicle purchase or modifications. Call to connect to an MS Navigator or search for resources online at **nationalMSSociety.org/FDR**.

The National Multiple Sclerosis Society is proud to be a source of information about multiple sclerosis. Our comments are based on professional advice, published experience and expert opinion, but do not represent individual therapeutic recommendations or prescriptions. For specific information and advice, consult your physician.

Early and ongoing treatment with an FDA- approved therapy can make a difference for people with multiple sclerosis. Learn about your options by talking to your healthcare professional and contacting the Society at **[nationalMSSociety.org](https://www.nationalmssociety.org)** or 1-800-344-4867.

The Society publishes many other resources about various aspects of MS. Visit **[nationalMSSociety.org/brochures](https://www.nationalmssociety.org/brochures)** or call 1-800-344-4867.

The Society mobilizes people and resources so that everyone affected by multiple sclerosis can live their best lives as we stop MS in its tracks, restore what has been lost and end MS forever. Last year, the Society invested \$35 million in MS research with more than 340 active projects around the world. Through its comprehensive nationwide network of services, the Society is focused on helping those affected by MS connect to the people, information and resources needed to live their best lives. We are united in our collective power to do something about MS now and end this disease forever. Learn more at **[nationalMSSociety.org](https://www.nationalMSSociety.org)**.



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