



MORE FATAL ACCIDENTS AMONG OLDER DRIVERS, REPORT FINDS

Seniors more likely to die in intersection crashes; left turns become challenging

Older drivers are much more likely to die in intersection crashes, and with each passing year the simple task of making a left turn becomes more challenging, according to a report.

The exhaustive compilation of years of research underscores a single, dispiriting bottom line: Baby boomers began turning 65 last year, and as more members join the ranks of the elderly, their inability to navigate traffic is forecast to result in more highway deaths.

If there is an antidote, it's one that will help all drivers: making the roads and the vehicles on them easier and safer to negotiate. Another safeguard for a swelling, less-able population: other transportation options and more self-contained communities.

"The growing ranks of older Americans will far outpace previous generations with their level of ability and activity," said Will Wilkins, executive director of the nonprofit research group TRIP, a partner in the report.

In 2009, 5,288 people age 65 and older were killed and 187,000 were injured in traffic crashes. They accounted for 16 percent of all traffic deaths and 8 percent of the

injured, but they accounted for 13 percent of the population, according to data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. The TRIP report said the number of deaths among people age 65 and older grew to 5,750 in 2010 even as NHTSA's data showed overall traffic deaths hit a record low.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports crash deaths per mile traveled begin to increase markedly after age 75, with deterioration in vision and the ability to reason and remember, as well as physical challenges such as arthritis or reduced strength.

The TRIP report, released Wednesday in partnership with the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, said intersections were particularly troubling to older drivers.

It cited NHTSA data that showed that in 2010, 37 percent of all fatal crashes involving a driver age 65 or older involved an intersection. Among younger drivers, 20 percent were related to an intersection.

The report also pointed to a University of Kentucky study that said left turns were a bigger problem for older drivers who have

problems judging appropriate gaps in oncoming traffic and estimating the speed of oncoming vehicles when they turn left.

The report said older drivers will be helped by more clear, simple and brighter road signs, better street lighting and wider traffic lanes, longer merge and exit lanes, rumble strips and additional left turn lanes.

Innovations being introduced in vehicles also will help older drivers, including lane change warnings and devices that sound alarms when something is too close in front or back of a vehicle.

Both the AAA and the American Association of Retired People have guidelines to help people decide whether they should continue to drive.

AARP says warning signs are too frequent "close calls," dents and scrapes caused by fences, mailboxes, garage doors and curbs, getting lost in familiar places, having trouble with signals, signs or markings, confusing the gas and brake pedals, misjudging gaps in traffic, experiencing road rage or honking drivers, becoming distracted, difficulty turning around while backing up or getting multiple traffic tickets or warnings.