Do medications influence my ability to drive?

Driving an automobile poses high demands on a person’s alertness, concentration, and ability to react quickly. The ability to drive safely can be influenced by some medications and some medical conditions. The driver of a vehicle is ultimately responsible for making the decision to drive safely.

**Which medical conditions may make me an unsafe driver?**

Any condition that can influence a person’s consciousness, especially if it may occur suddenly without warning, is a concern. Examples of these types of conditions include epilepsy, heart rhythm disturbances (cardiac arrhythmias), and diabetes treatment that can cause low blood sugar (hypoglycemia). Other conditions that influence driving ability are those associated with sudden attacks of pain, dizziness, or seizures, which may disturb your alertness and concentration. Fatigue, especially if profound, and sleep apnea (temporary absence of breathing) also are of concern. All these symptoms and signs of disease may be worsened by a person’s lack of sleep and stress level.

**What is the role of advanced age?**

Some age-related changes can influence a person’s ability to drive. The abilities to be attentive and to react generally decline with age, as well as memory, vision and hearing. The rate of these declines, however, varies tremendously. These aging factors are in addition to any underlying medical conditions more common with advancing age. As a preventive measure, the renewal of a driver’s license may be required at more frequent intervals in some states for older adults.

**Which medications may influence your ability to drive?**

Medications that affect the central nervous system (the brain) may influence your ability to drive. Medications prescribed for anxiety, depression, and stress can cause drowsiness and fatigue and may reduce your alertness, concentration, and ability to react. Sleeping pills and certain antihistamines also can affect driving ability.

The professional product label, or package insert, is a good source of information about a medication’s effect on driving. This information usually can be found in the Warning, Precautions, or Information for Patients sections of the package insert. It is recommended that you always refer to the
package insert for any newly prescribed medication. See Chapter 3 for more information about accessing package inserts.

What should I do?
Our advice is to avoid driving if you are tired and not fully alert, and to see how any new medication affects you before you drive. If you have certain underlying medical conditions or are prescribed certain medications, you may not be a safe driver. Talk to your physician or pharmacist if you have any questions.

Key messages

✓ Driving poses high demands on your alertness, concentration, and ability to react.
✓ Certain medical conditions can undermine these demands.
✓ Age-related declines in memory, vision, and hearing also may influence a person’s ability to drive safely.
✓ A driver should avoid certain medications causing drowsiness and fatigue.
✓ It is the responsibility of patients to decide whether it is safe for them to drive.