

DRIVING WITH MS



Multiple Sclerosis Society
of SA & NT

How can MS affect my ability to drive?

Driving a motor vehicle is a complex task, requiring perception, good judgement, responsiveness and reasonable physical capability. Therefore a range of medical conditions, as well as treatments, may have an impact on your fitness to drive.

A diagnosis of MS does not automatically mean that you are no longer able to drive. However the symptoms of MS are many and varied and, from time to time, may affect your ability to drive safely.

The ways in which MS may affect a person's driving ability include:

Leg coordination – important for brake, accelerator and clutch use.

- **Simultaneous coordination of arms and legs** – necessary when changing gears.
- **Strength and muscle power** – needed to use foot pedals and turn the steering wheel.
- **Controlled speed of movement** – important if you need to move your foot off the accelerator and on to the brake pedal quickly, or swerve to avoid another car.
- **Vision** – and your ability to focus, see objects and movement outside your direct line of vision, judge distance, see obstacles that have poor contrast with surroundings, cope with glare and changes in your visual field.

- **Sensitivity to heat** – particularly if the car doesn't have air conditioning or is parked in the sun. heat sensitivity can temporarily worsen other symptoms.
- **Attention and concentration** – drivers can easily be distracted by the radio, other cars or passengers.
- **Reaction time** – the ability to respond quickly when something appears in your visual field or when you hear something, such as an emergency siren.
- **Judgement and planning** – can impact on your ability to decide whether or not you are safe to drive or what action to take when driving (eg when to overtake, whether to stop or proceed through amber coloured traffic lights).
- **Memory** – knowledge of road rules, signs and routes to destinations is needed.
- **Mood and personality** – your ability to deal with frustrations and manage the anger of other drivers.
- **Sensation** – sensory changes can be problematic if you cannot feel the pedals under your feet or the gearshift, causing you to glance down each time you change gears.
- **Muscle control** – fatigued muscles and involuntary muscle spasms can make it difficult or impossible to move your foot from a pedal or turn the wheel when necessary.
- **Awareness of position of limbs –proprioception** can make finding pedals and hand controls difficult.

Who makes the rules about my ability to drive?

The responsibility for issuing, renewing, suspending, refusing or cancelling a person's driver's licence (including a conditional licence) lies ultimately with the driver licensing authority. (Service SA for SA & Department of Lands & Planning for NT).

Licensing decisions are based factors such as health and driving performance record. Other factors, such as the type of vehicle a person drives are also considered in the licensing decision.

In making a licensing decision, the driver licensing authority will seek input either directly from the driver and/or from a medical practitioner (doctor) or other health professional.

Your doctor doesn't make the rules but provides advice about how a particular

medical condition might affect your ability to drive safely and how it might be managed. Your health professionals are obligated to notify the licensing authority if a medical condition will affect driving.

What is my responsibility as a driver?

You are required to notify the driver licensing authority of any permanent or long term injury or illness that may impair your ability to drive safely.

If you hold a learner permit or drivers licence, you are required to notify the driver licensing authority of your diagnosis of MS as soon as possible.

If you continue to drive without notifying the driver licensing authority, knowing that you have a condition that may affect your capacity to drive, you are in breach of your licence conditions. If

you are involved in an accident under these circumstances and MS symptoms are found to be a contributing factor, you may be prosecuted and your insurance may be invalid.

What happens after I notify the driver licensing authority?

When you report your diagnosis of MS it does not necessarily mean that your licence will be taken away. It does mean that the driver licensing authority in your state or territory can work with you and your doctor to manage MS with respect to your driving.

The driver licensing authority may request you to have a medical examination and will provide a format for the doctor to complete. Your doctor is responsible for completing the information and advising you if MS impacts on your ability to drive safely.

When assessing your ability to drive safely, your doctor will consider your physical and psychological health. Because of the varied nature of MS symptoms, it may be difficult to make such an assessment. Your doctor may refer you to another specialist (eg ophthalmologist, neuropsychologist or driver trained occupational therapist). There may be costs associated with some of these referrals.

Once completed, you or your doctor can return the medical form to the driver licensing authority.

The driver licensing authority will notify you of the outcome of this medical review or of any additional documentation or further assessment that will help with the medical review process.

Medical reviews may result:

- **The retention of an unconditional driver licence** with no further action required.
- **The provision of a conditional licence**, allowing you to continue driving as long as certain conditions are met (eg driving during daylight hours or wearing glasses or corrective lenses while driving). A conditional licence may identify medical treatments and/or driving restrictions that enable you to drive safely. It may also specify periodic medical review (eg annually) by your doctor to establish your continued fitness to drive.
- **The suspension or withdrawal of your licence**, if MS is currently impairing your ability to continue driving safely.

What about conditional licences for commercial vehicle drivers?

A diagnosis of MS automatically prohibits the unconditional driving of commercial vehicles until further assessments are made.

Drivers of heavy vehicles, passenger vehicles or dangerous goods transport, you must meet higher medical standards because of the nature of work and are subject to annual reviews.

If you do not meet the health requirements to continue driving commercial vehicles, you may still be eligible to drive a private vehicle.

Do I need to notify my car insurance company?

When taking out a new vehicle insurance, or renewing your existing insurance policy, you have a duty to disclose any existing or new medical conditions. This may include MS if it affects your ability to drive. Talk with your medical practitioner or

neurologist to discuss your continued ability to drive.

Practical driver assessments

Driver assessment may be required in addition to a medical examination, in order to make definitive recommendations regarding your fitness to drive, the assessment is designed to measure the impact of MS on your driving skills including judgement, decision making skills, observation and vehicle handling.

Assessments can be initiated by your doctor, other health professional or the driver licensing authority.

The assessment may identify vehicle modifications which may make it safer to drive. All modifications are required to be made by a licensed installer. Further information is available at OT Australia SA, Occupational Therapy Driver

Assessment Services.

www.otsa.org.au

Find out more

For guidance in accessing other sources of information or advice on driving issues, please speak to one of your occupational therapists at your local MS Society.

References

Department for Transport, Energy and Infrastructure, The Driver's Handbook – Fitness to Drive

www.sa.gov.au

Disclaimer

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