

From the Senior Perspective: Driving at Night

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Are you concerned about driving at night? If so, you're not alone. Last year's senior survey showed 26 percent of Kennebunkport seniors aged 65 and older reported restrictions related to night driving. Some give up night driving entirely, some drive only as a last resort and some prefer driving in familiar areas. This article briefly touches on medical aspects as well as tips to improve night vision.

Did you know that diminished night vision is one of the most common problems of the aging eye? The Harvard Medical School, in its 2007 article "Blinded by the night", has listed several factors that affect our night vision as we age. These changes start as early as 40 years of age. They are:

1. Cloudier lenses (cataracts) scatter light and cause blurring
2. Smaller pupils (by forty percent) let in less light, not so much of a problem during the day but a big factor at night
3. Retina changes because almost one third of rods are lost with age and cholesterol deposits may impact remaining rods, resulting in a degradation of night vision.

There is no medical intervention that will fix night vision, although cataract surgery may help. Eye exams, as medically recommended, are necessary to optimally treat the aging eye. Also, experts suggest eating a good overall diet that's rich in fruits and vegetables and low in saturated fat. In other words, the same "gunk" that harms the cardiovascular system may also adversely affect our eyes.

Why is night vision important for all ages? Poor night vision seriously impacts safety as studies reported by the National Institute of Health show traffic deaths are three times greater at night than during the day though only 20 percent of driving is done after dark. Ninety percent of a driver's reaction depends on vision, and we were just not engineered to see very well in the dark.

The following six suggestions are critically important for everyone for improving vision when driving at night. They are attributed to the American Automobile Association and National Safety Council and were reported by New York Times and Vision Ease.

1. Protect your eyes during the day by wearing sunglasses that block 100 percent UV rays and roughly 85 percent visible light. Bright sunlight bleaches the photoreceptors in your rods and lengthens the time it takes for your eyes to

adjust to the dark. Ophthalmologists call the ability to see in the dark after exposure to bright light “dark adaptation” and it usually takes longer for older eyes. Interestingly, dark adaptation was documented in “Night Vision Manual for the Flight Surgeon” in 1992.

2. Clean the windshield of your vehicle, inside and out, at least weekly. As with a cloudy lens (cataract), a grimy windshield scatters light and intensifies glare. While it may be a bother to clean the inside of your windshield, the results are rewarding.
3. Clean your eyeglasses daily. Like a grimy windshield, grimy glasses scatter light.
4. Clean the headlights too; just a thin layer of grime can reduce their light by 90 percent.
5. Avoid looking directly at approaching vehicles at night, even when their lights are dimmed. Look to the right about 20 degrees, toward the white line on the right side of the road (if there is one).
6. Don't overdrive your headlights. Reduce speed as necessary to stop inside the area illuminated by your headlights.

These six tips on night vision are for everyone. They are especially important for seniors as the key to aging gracefully involves raised awareness and thoughtfully making the most of what you have to work with.