

# Helping senior drivers to stay safe and on the road longer

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A tool developed by researchers at The University of Western Ontario is designed to help seniors make better choices in automobiles and safety features, and perhaps allow them to drive safer and longer.

“For seniors, a car means independence,” says Lynn Shaw, an assistant professor in Occupational Therapy at Western. “But for older drivers, some cars can be a minefield - heavy doors that are hard to reach when you’re sitting, seatbelts that fit badly, poor lighting in dashboards and other areas of the car and, as in-car options increase, way too many buttons to push.”

Shaw and colleague Jan Polgar, Associate Professor of Occupational Therapy, as well as McMaster University researcher Brenda Vrkljan and Western research assistant Jill Jacobson, launched their research through AUTO21, a Canadian Network of Centres of Excellence.

That research revealed areas that concern senior drivers the most, and led to the development of the tool. After interviews and focus groups, the researchers are now looking to find 300 senior volunteers this summer, who are willing to give the tool - essentially a questionnaire - a try.

“As our population ages, carmakers will have to produce more senior-friendly vehicles and older drivers will have to become more conscious about the choices they make when they buy a vehicle,” says Shaw.

“Often, by the time a driver realizes there are issues that make driving the car difficult or complex, they have already completed their purchase. Our goal is to provide them with a tool that will help them plan and make the right choices.”

Shaw and Polgar point to the fact that many seniors simply try to make their own adjustments to the cars they buy, doing things like putting clothespins on uncomfortable seatbelts that come too close to their face, or adding a homemade pullstrap that helps close a door that may be out of reach. In the future, she says, [automakers](#) will be looking to attract increasingly older buyers and will make adjustments to features that will make cars safer to drive.

The Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT) has also taken an active role in helping keep senior drivers on the road in a safe fashion. CAOT launched the National Blueprint for Injury Prevention in Older Drivers in February 2009 and an Older Drive Safety website.

Polgar and Shaw say that [older drivers](#) are often afraid to acknowledge when driving becomes more difficult, and they rely on passengers - often other seniors - to assist in watching for signs, changing temperature settings, or adjusting other non-essential features.

The researchers will be recruiting seniors in the coming weeks to test the tool.

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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