



Driving with a musculoskeletal condition

- Pain, fatigue and medications can sometimes affect your ability to drive comfortably and safely
- This can have an impact on your independence and your ability to do the things you enjoy
- There are many things you can do to manage this

For most of us driving, and being able to drive, is an important part of our life. Driving gives you freedom and independence - you drive to work, school, health appointments, to visit your family and friends and explore the world around you.

However living with a musculoskeletal condition (e.g. arthritis, back pain, fibromyalgia) can sometimes affect your ability to drive. Pain, fatigue, joint stiffness and muscular aches and pains can make driving difficult. Things you've done a million times before like steering, doing up your seatbelt, checking your blind spot, or using the hand brake can be challenging. Even getting in and out of your car can sometimes be hard. And your ability to concentrate and focus while driving can be affected.

The good news is that there are things you can do to tackle these problems.

Talk with your doctor about your ability to drive

If your condition is starting to affect your ability to drive, talk with your doctor. Depending on the problems you're experiencing, your doctor may suggest a range of self-management strategies you can use to help you deal with these issues - for example, exercise, pain management techniques, aids and devices, cushions. Your doctor may also review your medications to ensure they're managing your condition as effectively as possible.

Your doctor may also suggest that you see an occupational therapist (OT) driver assessor. They can give you information and advice on appropriate vehicle modifications, how to use them properly and driving posture. Your driving can also be assessed if required.

Keep your doctor up-to-date with any changes you experience over time - both with your condition and your ability to drive - so that you can stay on top of any potential problems.

Know how your medications affect you

Do your medications affect your concentration? Do they make you drowsy? Or affect your coordination or reaction time? If so talk with your doctor about whether there's another medication you can use that won't have this effect on you. Or make alternative plans to get around (e.g. friend, cab) rather than driving while you're affected.

Read the labels on your medication and the consumer medicine information that comes with it. Do this for all of the medications you're taking - even if they're something you take infrequently. Understanding the affect medications can have on you, and whether or not this will impact your ability to drive safely, is extremely important. If you're not sure, have a chat with your doctor or pharmacist.



Alcohol can change the way some medications work, and may exacerbate the side effects that impair your driving (e.g. drowsiness, loss of coordination). It's best to avoid alcohol while taking medications, especially when you plan to drive.

Get comfortable in the car

Adjust your seat and mirrors carefully every time you get in the car. If your feet and ankles are stiff, move your seat forward so that you're pushing the pedals with your entire foot and not just your toes. Make sure that the height of your seat lets you have control of the pedals without being uncomfortable. You should be able to reach and operate all of the controls, pedals, steering wheel etc, and have good visibility through your windows and mirrors.

If you have pain in your hips or legs, there are special cushions available that provide support for the lumbar spine, hips and buttocks. Empty your pockets of keys, wallet, small change and other bits and pieces. They can cause irritation and pain - especially if you have a long drive ahead of you.

By getting comfortable before you head out in your car, you can hopefully prevent any minor irritations from becoming a major, painful nuisance.

Take breaks

Don't drive for more than an hour without a break. Stop, get out of your car, stretch or massage any tight muscles. Walk around. Check out what's nearby - a coffee shop, historical marker, a breathtaking view. It's amazing how much you can discover when you stop and look around. And the break will help you arrive at your destination feeling much better than if you'd driven straight through.

Build these breaks into your overall trip time so that you have plenty of time to get from point A to point B safely and comfortably.

Manage your fatigue

You may experience fatigue, or intense tiredness, as a result of your condition, the effect of some medications or lack of sleep. Don't drive when you're feeling foggy or fatigued. If you need to get somewhere, ask a friend or family member to drive you, catch a cab or an Uber.

Depending on the amount of fatigue you're experiencing, and where you're travelling to, you may also be able to use public transport or walk.

Plan around your fatigue. If you know that you're generally fatigued around 3pm, plan to do any driving before this.

Your ability to drive safely is compromised if you start getting tired or your pain becomes worse. Give your keys to another driver or have a backup plan for those days when driving isn't an option.

Investigate aids and gadgets

There are many aids available to help make driving more comfortable including:

- swivel seat cushion - this cushion is placed on top of your car seat. You sit down on the cushion with your body facing out and then swivel your body and legs around to face the dashboard.
- lumbar back support - a lumbar support pillow or a rolled up towel can be used to support your lower back.
- steering wheel cover - can help make your steering wheel easier to grip if you have stiff, sore hands.
- petrol cap turner - if you find it difficult to twist the petrol cap on or off, try using a petrol cap turner. It'll make twisting the cap easier.
- grab handles and bars - can be added to your car to help you get in and out of your car more easily.
- seat belt reacher - can help reduce arm and shoulder strain when reaching for your seat belt and pulling it across your body.
- reversing cameras and parking sensors - are available in many new cars, and can also be added to older ones. They can make parking and reversing easier if you have problems twisting, turning your neck or looking over your shoulder.

The Independent Living Centre (ILC) provides an extensive list of devices and information about car gadgets and modifications available. The occupational therapists at ILC can give you information and advice. Contact them on 1300 885 886 or visit their website.

Use heat and cold treatments

Applying heat or cold to a painful area before you head out in your car can help relieve your pain. Some people prefer heat, others prefer cold. Generally speaking, heat can relieve muscle spasms and tension. Cold can reduce swelling. Heat and cold treatments are available in a wide range (e.g. packs, rubs, gels, patches). Some of these items are portable and can be left in your glovebox in case you need them during your trip. Always read the instructions carefully before using.

Look after yourself

Regular exercise, eating a healthy diet and getting enough quality sleep will contribute to overall good health. They will also help you manage your pain more effectively. This in turn will have a positive influence on your ability to drive comfortably and be safe on the road.

Plan your trip

Planning ahead will make you more confident during the drive. Print out maps or enter the route into your GPS, plan rest stops, fuel stops and pace yourself.

If you're making a long trip, stop every hour, get out of your car and stretch. Leave early and give yourself plenty of time. You don't want to feel tense or rushed.

Avoid rush hour if possible. Talk with your employer about the possibility of starting work a little earlier or later and finishing a little earlier or later so you can drive when it's less crowded on the roads.

Remember to keep on top of regular car maintenance. Tyres, fluids and brakes need regular attention for safety and peace of mind.

Understand your responsibilities as a driver

In all Australian states and territories, you're required to inform your licensing authority of any long-term or permanent injury or illness that may affect your ability to drive safely. Visit the Australian Government website for more information about licensing and driving in Australia. It provides links to each state and territory authority for more information

Depending on your condition and how it affects you, you may be issued with a conditional licence. It's your responsibility to comply with the requirements of your conditional licence, including medical treatments and car modification requirements.

Practical driver assessment

The registration and licensing authorities in each state and territory is responsible for ensuring that all Australian drivers are fit to drive. You may be asked to provide a medical report from your health professional that confirms you're able to drive safely. Once your medical report has been reviewed, your driving may then be assessed by the registration and licensing authority, or by an occupational therapist.

Your assessment can help you identify aids, techniques and modifications to improve your comfort and safety when driving.

If your assessment is satisfactory you may be able to resume driving with an unconditional licence, with modifications to your car and/or some restrictions to your driving.

If you're found unsafe to drive you may be recommended to take some lessons to improve your driving skills, familiarise yourself with adaptive driving equipment or wait for improvement in your condition to occur.

Or you may be assessed as being unsafe to continue to drive. The registration and licensing authority will make the final decision regarding your licence status. If they vary, suspend or cancel your licence you can appeal against the decision.

Parking permits

An Australia-wide Disabled Parking Scheme includes an Australian Disability Parking Permit, which is recognised nationally. A valid permit enables you to park in disability parking spots which are wider than usual and are generally closer to businesses. All enquiries about permit applications, cost, eligibility and use should be directed to your relevant State or Territory authority. For more information visit the Australian Government website.

Making the tough decision not to drive

There may be times when you decide it's not safe for yourself or others if you drive. This may be an occasional decision not to drive (e.g. when you're feeling fatigued) or it might be the permanent decision to no longer drive.

If you decide that you should no longer drive, you may experience a range of negative emotions. You may feel sad, angry, guilty or frustrated from time to time, even when you know you've made the right decision. If you find yourself feeling troubled or upset, consider discussing how you feel with a family member, close friend or counsellor. It's important to acknowledge these feelings so that you can deal with them.

Explore alternative forms of transport

The thought of no longer being able to drive can be frightening, but there are still many ways you can get around and remain independent including:

- using public transport
- catching a cab (talk to your doctor about subsidised taxi fares) or an Uber
- hitching a ride with a friend or family member
- contacting your council about local community mobility services
- investigating electric scooters
- walking.

Talk to your doctor, occupational therapist, your local council or call our MSK Help Line for more information about how you can access alternative means of transport.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Occupational therapist
- Local council
- Musculoskeletal Australia
MSK Help Line: 1800 263 265

This information was made possible through a grant from the RACV Community Foundation.

How we can help

Call our MSK Help Line and speak to our nurses.
Phone 1800 263 265 or email helpline@msk.org.au.

We can help you find out more about:

- arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions
- ways to live well with these conditions
- managing your pain
- upcoming webinars, seminars and other events.

More to explore

- RACV www.racv.com.au | 13 72 28
- Australian Government Department of Social Services www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/disability-and-carers/programmes-services/for-people-with-disability/australian-disability-parking-scheme
- Australian Government Registration and Licensing authorities
www.australia.gov.au/information-and-services/transport-and-regional/registration-and-licensing-authorities
- Independent Living Centres Australia
<http://ilcaustralia.org.au> | 1300 885 886
- Occupational Therapy Australia
www.otaus.com.au | 03 9415 2955
- Disabled Motorists Australia
www.disabledmotorists.org.au | 03 9386 0413
- Your local council

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