



Driving with more comfort and less pain

- Driving can be painful and exhausting if you have arthritis or a musculoskeletal condition
- There are many things you can do to improve this, including using aids and gadgets, having your car modified or buying a new car that better suits your needs

Living with arthritis or a musculoskeletal condition (e.g. back pain, osteoporosis, fibromyalgia) can sometimes affect your ability to drive comfortably. Joint stiffness, fatigue and muscular aches and pains can make driving difficult and painful. 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 cause you pain.

The good news is that in many cases, there are ways you can manage these problems to make driving safe, comfortable and less painful.

Identify the problem

Before you can change anything, you need to really consider the situation and be clear about what's happening. Just saying to yourself that 'driving hurts' is too broad, and doesn't help you solve the problem.

By looking more closely at the situation and identifying the specific problem, you can then start working on solutions. So ask yourself:

- Which joints hurt when I'm driving? For example, do your hands hurt when you grip the steering wheel, or try to remove the fuel cap? Does your lower back hurt when you're driving for extended periods?
- What movements while driving aggravate my condition? For example, does looking over your shoulder to check your blind spot aggravate your neck pain? Does twisting to check behind you when reversing hurt your back?
- And to what degree do these things interfere with my ability to drive comfortably and safely? For example, does it only happen occasionally or does it happen every time you drive? Does it mean that because your neck hurts, you don't check your blind spot properly?

Talk with your healthcare team

Armed with this information, talk with your doctor, occupational therapist and physiotherapist for information and advice.

Discuss your condition and its management with your doctor. Is it being managed effectively? Are your medications and other treatments adequately controlling your condition, pain and other symptoms?

Visit a physiotherapist. They're experts in movement and function and will work with you to increase or maintain your muscle strength and movement. They can also show you pain relief techniques and design an individual exercise program for you.

Talk with an occupational therapist. They can help you learn better ways to do everyday activities including driving. They can also provide information on aids and equipment to make driving easier. Some occupational therapists specialise in driving assessments and can help you remain driving as long as it's safe for you to do so.

An occupational therapist can also help you with information about car modifications and how to use them, undertake driver training and advise you on licensing requirements and funding options.



Things you can do to make driving comfortable

As well as working with your healthcare team to make driving less painful, there are many things you can do to help yourself, including:

- **stay active** - physical activity is the key to maintaining muscle strength, joint flexibility and managing your pain. Strong, healthy muscles, bones and joints are important to enable you to do all the things you want to do, including driving.
- **learn ways to manage pain** - there are many strategies you can use to deal with pain. Knowing about these and what works best for you is vital. Self-massage, heat/cold treatments, pain medication, deep breathing, listening to music or podcasts - there are so many ways you can get temporary pain relief while driving, and while taking a rest break.
- **aids and gadgets** - aids, gadgets and other supports can help make your car more comfortable and less painful to drive. You can get everything from a swivel seat that help you get in and out more easily, to padded seat belt covers that protect a sore neck, key holders that make your keys easier to hold, bigger and wider mirrors that reduce blind spots if you have limited neck mobility and lumbar cushions and supports to ease low back pain. For information about the range of aids available talk with an occupational therapist or contact the Independent Living Centre on 1300 885 886.
- **take breaks** - it's a simple but effective way to make driving less painful. Allow yourself extra time so you can take a break, get out of your car and stretch before you start to feel pain and stiffness. There's truth in the old adage 'prevention is better than cure'.
- **medications** - can provide temporary pain relief, and may be an option in some instances. Be aware that some pain relievers can have side effects such as dizziness and drowsiness. This can affect your ability to drive safely.

Read our [Driving information sheet](#) to find out more about driving if you have arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions, including your responsibilities as a driver, dealing with fatigue, what happens if you can no longer drive, driver assessments and much more. Our top tip for travelling well is to be prepared and proactive.

Car features, modifications and new cars

Cars have come a long way in the last few years. There are so many features, modifications and technologies that make driving easier.

Depending on your condition, how it affects you and the joints it affects (e.g. hands, neck, back) some of the things that may help include:

- remote (keyless) entry and ignition
- power steering
- button controls for windshield wipers, defogging, and mirrors
- adjustable steering wheel
- padded steering wheel cover
- back supports
- modified or extended seatbelts
- power adjustable seats
- mirror extensions
- electric hand brake
- pedal modifications
- backup camera
- cruise control
- heated seats.

You can get many of these features in a new car, or your car may be able to be modified to include these features.

Understanding your condition, and how driving can affect your symptoms, will give you an idea of what features to look for in a new car. Use the list you created when you assessed your situation - this can help you decide on the priority features you need in a car.

For information on modifying your car, or buying a new car that's right for you, the RACV has developed two very useful guides:

- [Modifying your car - Keeping Mobile](http://www.racv.com.au/content/dam/racv/images/public-policy/pdfs/roadusers/RACV-Keeping-Mobile-Brochure.pdf)
- [Buying a car](http://www.racv.com.au/on-the-road/buying-a-car.html)

Keeping it legal

Any modifications made to your car - both big and small - must comply with VicRoads guidelines. If major modifications are required, such as hand controls and changeable accelerator pedals a Vehicle Assessment Signatory Scheme (VASS) approval certificate is also required.

An occupational therapist must check that the modification paperwork meets compliance. Your driver's licence must state that your car has modifications.

Funding for modifications

There are several funding options available to help eligible drivers make modifications to their car.

The [Vehicle Modification Subsidy Scheme \(VMSS\)](#) provides eligible Victorians with funding for vehicle modifications. You'll need to be assessed by a prescribing occupational therapist or a VicRoads

Accredited Driver Assessor to determine the most appropriate and safe modification.

<https://swep.bhs.org.au/vehicle-modifications-subsidy-scheme.php>

The **Employment Assistance Fund (EAF)** is a Commonwealth Government scheme that gives financial help to eligible people with disability and mental health conditions and employers buy work related modifications and services, including modifications to work vehicles.

www.jobaccess.gov.au/downloads/employment-assistance-fund-guidelines

The **Department of Veterans Affairs Rehabilitation Appliances Program** funds vehicle modifications for eligible veterans. www.dva.gov.au/factsheet-mrc10-motor-vehicle-compensation-scheme-mvcs

The **Australian Tax Office** has a car tax concession to assist eligible drivers to claim tax concessions when buying, leasing or modifying a car.

www.ato.gov.au/Individuals/People-with-disability/Tax-concessions---cars/Eligibility-for-car-tax-concessions

Insurance

Insurance policies can vary greatly. To ensure you're covered, contact your insurance provider to see if any car modifications you're planning will affect your insurance.

Where to get help

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

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
- VicRoads www.vicroads.vic.gov.au
- Independent Living Centres Australia - 1300 885 886 <http://ilcaustralia.org.au>
- Occupational Therapy Australia www.otaus.com.au
- Disabled Motorists Australia www.disabledmotorists.org.au

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

June 2018