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National Aging and Disability Transportation Center  
[contact@nadtc.org](mailto:contact@nadtc.org)  
866-983-3222



# NCST's **TRENDS** in Senior Transportation

*A publication of the National Center on Senior Transportation*

*August 2011*

## Tips for Drivers and Passengers

According to a 2009 report by the National Alliance for Caregiving in collaboration with AARP, 65.7 million people in the United States are caregivers. Family caregivers provide support in different ways, and one of the most common is driving older family members to and from a variety of destinations. Sometimes, an older family member may be concerned about a particular trip, and the caregiver may have concerns as well. When the caregiver and older family member take the time to talk about the purpose and route of the trip and view the trip from the passenger's point of view, they will be better positioned to plan the trip together and enjoy a safer and more positive experience.

This tip sheet is designed for both caregivers who drive older family members in their own vehicles as well as the older family members who are their passengers. While no two drivers, passengers and trips are the same, commonalities occur among them. We invite caregivers (drivers) and older family members (passengers) to review this tip sheet and think about the issues that are relevant and important to them. This tip sheet includes common sense ideas to address real problems. Access to transportation is important for everyone. A heartfelt thank you to the caregivers who provide this valuable support to the people they care about the most.

### Purpose and Route of the Trip

Everyone knows that some destinations are more enjoyable than others. For example, a trip to an oral surgeon is not as enjoyable as a trip to a long-awaited movie premiere. We also know that some routes are more enjoyable than others. Running late in a pounding rain, in rush hour traffic, with limited parking at the final destination takes a toll on everyone.



*A driver assists a passenger with exiting a car.*

### Drivers can:

- Keep in mind that some trips are more difficult than others.
- Learn from past trip experiences and plan for the future.
- Identify if a passenger had concerns about a particular destination and use that information to prepare for the next trip to that destination.
- Think about how traffic, weather and parking might affect themselves as well as the passenger.
- Use this information to identify route options and make informed decisions prior to beginning the trip.

## The Passenger's Point of View

Understanding the passenger's physical fitness just prior to when a trip begins is important.

### Drivers can:

- Determine if the passenger is well-rested; having a good day in terms of aches, pains, and balance; and feeling strong enough to transfer in and out of the vehicle.
  - If the answer is "yes," drivers can plan the trip accordingly.
  - If the answer is "no," drivers can think about how they might accommodate the passenger given his current physical status.
- Adjust their interactions with the passenger during the trip (pace, communication, etc.) given the passenger's current physical status.

Understanding the passenger's mental fitness just prior to a trip is equally important.

### Drivers can:

- Recall how the passenger reacted on previous trips and use this information to help plan future trips.
- Place themselves in the shoes of their passenger and answer these and similar questions to plan future trips. *How would I feel if I...*
  - Wasn't told about the destination of the trip?
  - Had to repeatedly ask where we were going?
  - Couldn't remember the reason for the trip?
  - Was anxious about what would happen once we reached the destination?
  - Was too tired to go on the trip?
  - Would rather be doing something else?
  - Was concerned that I would not have access to a restroom?
  - Felt my beloved caregiver didn't have the greatest driving skills?

## Time

Time may or may not be on your side. While a driver may need to start and end a trip within a given time frame, the passenger's physical and mental abilities may require more time than is available. Asking your passenger to move along a bit faster or asking your driver to slow down and not be in such a rush is both common and stressful.

### Drivers can:

- Do their best to think realistically about the amount of time needed.
- Add additional time to play it safe and create the most relaxed environment.

## Planning the Trip Together

Drivers and passengers who are able to take some time to plan the trip together will be well-served. Depending on the circumstances, planning could be an informal, quick conversation or more involved if warranted. The following examples of common issues include potential solutions of how drivers and passengers can work together to plan a trip.

**Issue:** The passenger is unable to remember the final destination and reason for the trip.

**Driver and Passenger Discussion:** *What can we do to help remind you about where we're going?*

### Potential Solutions:

- A passenger might be interested in holding something related to the trip:
  - A card (created by the driver) with the name and address of the destination
  - A menu from the restaurant
  - Paperwork needed for the trip
  - The party invitation
  - Directions to the destination
  - A photograph
- Drivers can do their best to prepare themselves to answer the same question many times during the trip. "To the grocery store" is obviously better than "For the third time Mom, the grocery store".
- Engaging in conversation while driving can be difficult, especially if a driver needs to speak in a louder voice to a passenger who is hard of hearing. In these situations, drivers that gently remind passengers of their need to focus on the road, prior to beginning the trip, may avoid hurt feelings during the trip.

**Issue:** The passenger is anxious about going to the destination, too tired to go on the trip, and would rather do something else.

**Driver and Passenger Discussion:** *What can we do to make you more comfortable in the vehicle?*

## Potential Solutions:

- If a passenger is anxious about going to the destination and the trip is required, drivers can create a less stressful environment by:
  - Taking some time to take a brief walk or spend a few quiet moments relaxing before entering the vehicle.
  - Providing plenty of time to get to the destination.
  - Playing the passenger's favorite radio station or CD.
  - Assuring the passenger that they will be supporting her at the destination.
  - Validating the passenger's concerns and noting their (the driver's) understanding of how difficult the trip and destination will be.
- If the passenger is too tired and the trip is required, drivers can create a comfortable environment by:
  - Encouraging the passenger to close his eyes and rest during the trip.
  - Asking the passenger if he would like to listen to relaxing music.
  - Doing their best to leave plenty of time if the passenger needs extra time to enter and exit the vehicle.
  - Parking as close to the destination's entrance or, if it's safe, dropping the passenger at the entrance and returning to the passenger after parking the car.
  - Using a valet service to park the car if it's affordable or available.
  - For passengers with a mobility aide, taking and using it during the trip.
- If the passenger would rather be doing something else and the trip is required, drivers can validate the passenger's concerns by noting their understanding of the situation and talking about how her preferences might be addressed differently in the future.

**Issue:** The passenger feels that the caregiver doesn't have the greatest driving skills.

**Driver and Passenger Discussion:** What can we do to make you feel safe during the trip?

## Potential Solutions:

- Whether the passenger is accurate in her assessment of a driver's skills, backseat drivers are alive and well at any age. Drivers should do their best to acknowledge that they've heard the comment and take the high road and avoid negative confrontation.

- Choosing the best route (from several options) may be helpful. Are surface streets preferable to the expressway? Is a more scenic or familiar route more enjoyable?
- If trip time is flexible, drivers and passengers can consider traveling during non-peak hours to avoid heavy traffic.

**Issue:** The passenger is concerned about lack of access to a restroom.

**Driver and Passenger Discussion:** What should we do if either one of us needs to use the restroom during the trip?

## Potential Solutions:

- Asking the question this way (both of us may need a restroom) allows the driver to be respectful, compassionate and alleviate some of the pressure the passenger may feel regarding this issue.
- Using a restroom just prior to the trip, identifying places to stop along the route, and knowing the restroom location at the final destination can help address this issue.
- After careful thought and discussion, the driver and passenger may agree to place an attractive towel on the car seat and bring a discreet bag with a change of clothes if it will permit the passenger to feel more comfortable about the trip.

**Issue:** The passenger has difficulty entering and exiting the vehicle.

**Driver and Passenger Discussion:** What can we do to make getting in and out of the car easier?

## Potential Solutions:

It's important for both driver and passenger to be aware of proper body mechanics when entering and leaving a vehicle since many injuries are preventable. Drivers can create a safe environment by:

- Checking the area for slippery spots or possible tripping hazards.
- Wearing appropriate footwear. Non-skid heels and soles are safer for the driver and passenger.
- Using the proper stance by spreading their feet to a width that feels comfortable—usually shoulder's width apart.
- Keeping their head and body as upright as possible.
- Lowering their hips to the height of the passenger that they are lifting by bending their knees and hips rather than their back.

- Carrying the weight of the passenger as close to their (the driver's) center of gravity as possible.
- Getting as close to the passenger as possible.
- Bearing weight on their forearms rather than on their hands.
- Lifting with their legs—and not attempting to lift with their back alone.
- When lifting, making sure not to rotate the passenger's spine or shift the position of his feet.
- Knowing their limits.
- Helping the passenger to push or pull himself (versus lifting) whenever possible.
- Verbally describing each step to the passenger so that he has the opportunity to prepare.

If the passenger finds it difficult to sit comfortably in the car, drivers can create a more pleasant environment by:

- Using a swivel cushion to help the passenger swing her legs while in a sitting position on the car seat.
- Placing a towel on the car seat and helping the passenger sit on the towel-covered seat, going to the driver side door and slowly pulling the towel toward themselves.

## Communication During the Trip

Conversation between two people during a trip is expected. It's important, however, that talkative passengers do not distract the driver. For most drivers, it will be quite difficult to ask a passenger to remain silent, so staying open, positive, tolerant, and understanding is the key.

Several of the previously mentioned tips include suggestions on how to orient passengers to the location and purpose of the destination. Reasons other than location and destination questions may also cause talkative passengers to engage the driver in conversation. The following tips may assist drivers when conversing with talkative passengers.

### Drivers can:

- Look directly at the passenger when the vehicle comes to a complete stop.
- Speak clearly and at the appropriate volume while driving.
- Remain patient and allow plenty of time for the passenger to respond to any questions.
- Keep directions simple.
- Use words that are familiar to the passenger.
- Refrain from providing too much or confusing information.

## Summary

Family caregivers support older family members in countless ways and their time and efforts are priceless. Driving is a common activity and can sometime present unique challenges. Caregivers and older adult family members will be well served by planning ahead and addressing potential complications before they happen. If difficulties do arise, drivers and passengers can do their best to learn from them and address them in the future.

## Source

Easter Seals, Inc., *Transportation Solutions for Caregivers: A Starting Point*. Available on the NCST website.

## References

Community Transportation Association of America (1996). *PASS: Passenger Service and Safety Certification*. Washington, D.C.

Hands of Grace (1997) *Hands of Grace: Volunteer Training*. Delta, Ohio.

National Alliance for Caregiving in collaboration with AARP (2009). *Caregiving in the U.S. 2009* (c) 2009 NAC and AARP.

Szuch, Larry and Jodi Mount (2003). *I CARE—Interfaith Companion and Ride Express—Volunteer Training Manual*. Decatur, Georgia.

## Additional Resources

### The National Center on Senior Transportation

[www.seniortransportation.net](http://www.seniortransportation.net) • (866) 528-6278

The mission of the National Center on Senior Transportation is to increase transportation options for older adults and enhance their ability to live more independently within their communities throughout the United States. NCST is funded through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Transit Administration, and is administered by Easter Seals, Inc. in partnership with the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging.

### The ElderCare Locator

[www.eldercare.gov](http://www.eldercare.gov) • (800) 677-1116

The Eldercare Locator, a public service of the Administration on Aging, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is a nationwide service that connects older Americans and their caregivers with information on senior services.