

Driving after brain injury



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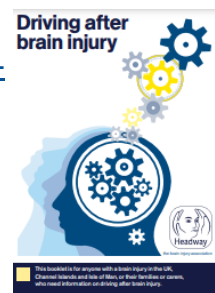
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People directly affected by brain injury can receive limited free copies of Headway print booklets by contacting the helpline on 0808 800 2244.

*print copy may contain minor differences due to revision of content



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Introduction

Although we may take it for granted, driving is a very complex activity requiring a number of cognitive and physical skills, as well as the ability to coordinate these.

Any of these skills may be impaired after a brain injury. Fortunately, many people who have sustained a brain injury retain most of their previous driving abilities, and are able to return to driving soon afterwards. However, there are legal requirements which must be adhered to. It is sensible to take precautions, such as having a driving assessment, even if you feel that your driving skills remain in tact. It should be remembered that a car is a potentially lethal weapon: many people with a brain injury were themselves injured in a road traffic collision.

It can be relatively straightforward to make adaptations to a vehicle in order to compensate for physical disabilities. However, the less obvious effects of brain injury - on thinking, memory, judgement, decision making and emotions - can be more difficult to overcome.

Ultimately, the decision on whether someone is safe to drive lies with the licensing authorities. This publication explains the processes involved in reporting a medical condition and provides advice on minimising cognitive and physical impairments.

The information in this publication does not replace clinical guidance from medical professionals or information given by a licensing authority. You should always seek advice from a GP or relevant professional for help with managing the effects of brain injury.

Legal requirements

If you drive and have had a brain injury, it is a legal requirement to inform your relevant licensing authority. If you are in England, Wales or Scotland, this is the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA). If you are in Northern Ireland, it is the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA). Failure to inform authorities could result in a fine of up to £1,000. It would also mean that your license is not valid and that you

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would be uninsured in the event of an accident.

As a general rule, the medical standards state that after a 'traumatic brain injury' drivers with an ordinary car or motorcycle (Group 1) licence must not drive, and that consideration for relicensing can take between 6 to 12 months. This will depend on features such as length of posttraumatic amnesia, seizures and other clinical issues. Other forms of acquired brain injury have slightly different rules, but if there are lasting impairments which affect driving ability then the licence is likely to be removed for a period. However, because every brain injury is different, each case is considered on an individual basis. Further information on legal requirements is available from the [DVLA](#) (England, Scotland and Wales), the [DVA](#) (Northern Ireland).

Legal requirements for professional drivers

If you are a professional driver with a Group 2 driving licence, the required standards of health and driving ability are higher than for Group 1 licence holders. Different rules apply for Group 2 licences and it is possible that you will be able to keep your Group 1 licence, but that your Group 2 licence will be suspended or withdrawn for a period of time.

Informing authorities

In **England, Scotland and Wales**, you can contact the DVLA by telephone or email (contact details are available in the 'Useful organisations' section) and they will then send you a medical questionnaire to complete. There are different questionnaires available for different conditions; however, many types of brain injury are covered by the questionnaire *B1 online: confidential medical information*. You can also download the questionnaire yourself from the UK government website. This questionnaire includes a consent form to obtain further information from your GP or hospital consultant.

In **Northern Ireland**, you need to inform the DVA. You can do this by post, telephone or email. If you write to the DVA, you will need to send both parts of

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your driving license along with a letter outlining the nature of your injury.

In **Jersey**, licences are issued by each local Parish, so you will need to inform them of any relevant medical condition.

In **Guernsey**, you need to contact Driver and Vehicle Licensing (DVL).

On the **Isle of Man** you will need to inform the Department of Infrastructure's Licensing Section.

Contact details for each of these authorities are available in the 'Useful organisations' section.

While waiting to hear back from the licensing authority, you should consult your doctor as to whether you are fit to continue driving in the meantime.

The [Assessing fitness to drive – a guide for medical professionals handbook](#) is available for doctors in England, Scotland and Wales who require guidance on whether or not you can safely drive after your injury.

Decisions made by the authorities

It can take over 6 weeks in some cases to hear back from the licensing authority. When you do hear back from them, there are a number of decisions which they might have arrived at:

- You may be allowed to **keep your licence** or get a new one.
- Your **licence may be withdrawn** or your application turned down. If so, the reason for this decision will be explained to you and you will also be told when you can re-apply for a licence – e.g. six months or a year later.
- You may be given a **time-limited licence** which is valid for up to five years, after which your fitness to continue driving will be re-assessed.
- You may be asked to take an **expert driving assessment**, or to undergo an eye test or driving test before a final decision is made.
- Your license may require you to have **special controls fitted** to the vehicle that you drive, to enable you to overcome any physical disabilities. Driving

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Mobility can conduct an assessment of adaptation needs to help with adapting a vehicle to make it more suitable for you.

Informing the authorities on behalf of a brain injury survivor

Families, friends or carers

If you are concerned about a brain injury survivor's ability to drive, or they have not contacted the authorities themselves to notify them of their injury, you can do this anonymously on their behalf. This is especially important if the survivor lacks insight into the impact of their injury and is not aware of how their driving skills have been affected (for more information on this issue, see our publication [Insight and awareness issues after brain injury](#)).

GPs

GPs have a legal duty to report a patient to the authorities if they think the patient is not medically fit to drive and have reason to suspect that they have not handed their license back. If you are a GP and are not sure whether the survivor is fit to drive, consult the *Assessing fitness to drive – a guide for medical professionals* handbook which is available on the UK government website.

Hidden effects of brain injury

Driving involves much more than simply starting, steering and stopping a car. It also requires concentration, observation, and the ability to interpret complex road situations accurately and to react calmly and swiftly. A brain injury can affect these skills, as well as a range of other skills that driving relies on. Some of these are listed below.

- Poor concentration, causing you to become distracted and confused when there is a lot going on, or easily lose the sense of what you are doing;
- Reduced reaction time, due to slower speed of information processing;
- Difficulty switching or dividing attention;

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- Reduced ability to think ahead or anticipate what may happen;
- Difficulty interpreting what is seen ('reading the road'), which increases the time needed to make a decision;
- Poor memory. You may forget where you are going or how to get there, or what to do in a complex road situation;
- Poor judgement of novel situations;
- Perceptual difficulties – e.g. inability to pick out a 'stop' sign at a busy junction, or to judge speed or distance;
- Impulsive behaviour, not thinking through the consequences of actions;
- Inability to control one's temper or to cope with the frustrations of traffic delays.

While you may feel able to carry on driving after a brain injury, it is important to remember that it can take time to recover and to fully discover the long-term effects of the injury. It might be difficult to accept that, while you still may have the technical 'know how' for driving, other skills that driving relies on have been affected.

Alternatively, relatives may be anxious to protect you if they think you could still be a competent driver. An objective assessment of your abilities could therefore be helpful for both yourself and your family. More information about this is available in the section 'Driving assessments'.

Physical effects of brain injury

Physical effects of brain injury which may impact on driving ability include:

- Problems with movement, balance and co-ordination;
- Weakness of limbs;
- Fatigue;
- Loss of hearing or other senses.

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These effects can very often be overcome by adaptations to the car or by taking sensible precautions when driving (see section on '*If you are allowed to keep your licence*'). However, the following physical effects need to be taken into particular account and must be reported to the licensing authorities due to the serious impact they can have on your fitness to drive.

Seizures

There is a higher than average risk of epilepsy after certain types of brain injury. If you have had a seizure, you must stop driving and inform your relevant licensing authority (see section '*How to inform the authorities*'). Seizures are dealt with on an individual basis by licensing authorities, and their decision will depend on the type of seizure experienced.

If you have seizures which don't affect your consciousness when awake, or only when you sleep, then you may still be allowed to drive.

The Epilepsy Action website provides more detailed information on epilepsy and driving at www.epilepsy.org.uk/info/driving. For further information on epilepsy, see our publication [Epilepsy after brain injury](#).

Visual problems

After a brain injury, a person may have visual field neglect, which means that they cannot see anything to one side of them without moving their head.

Nystagmus (involuntary rhythmic shaking of the eyes) and diplopia (double vision) are also fairly common. These visual problems may affect observation skills and the ability to judge speed, distance and depth, although the person may not actually be aware of these problems.

An orthoptist, ophthalmologist or a registered optician would be able to properly evaluate and assess the extent of visual problems.

- You will not be able to drive if your visual field is reduced.
- You must be able to read a number plate from a distance of 20 metres (with glasses or contact lenses if required).

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The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) website provides more detailed information on visual problems and driving at www.rnib.org.uk. More information on visual problems after a brain injury is available in our publication [*Visual problems after brain injury*](#).

Driving ability assessments

If there is any doubt at all about your ability to drive safely, it is important to have an expert driving assessment, even if you feel that your driving abilities were excellent before your injury. In England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland you can get an assessment at a Driving Mobility centre.

Driving Mobility, formerly known as the Forum of Mobility Centres, has a network of centres across the UK that offer assessments, information and advice on driving and mobility.

The network of centres can provide an impartial assessment. The centre will tell you:

- Whether your injury affects your fitness to drive.
- What car adaptations would help to overcome any physical disabilities.
- The effect that your injury has on seeing or thinking, how this might affect your driving, and how to cope.

The driving assessment also helps to reduce the anxiety that you or your family may have about your ability to drive safely. Advice might be given to help you rebuild your confidence on the road. In other cases, over-confidence may be an issue, and you may need help to be more realistic and develop a safer driving style.

There are currently 20 driving centres throughout the UK. You can find your nearest one on the Driving Mobility website at www.drivingmobility.org.uk/find-a-centre.

A fee is payable for undergoing a driving ability assessment, which varies from centre to centre. Contact your chosen centre for more information. It is worth

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noting that the role of the centre is to enable safe driving, not to keep people off the road. A centre cannot withdraw your driving licence. After the assessment, they can make recommendations to the DVLA or DVA, which are the only agencies able to withdraw a licence.

If you are allowed to keep your license

You will no doubt feel very pleased and relieved to be told that you are fit to drive. Some general tips for safer, less stressful, driving should still be kept in mind:

- When you start driving again after your brain injury it is advisable to have another adult in the car as a passenger for the first few journeys, and to keep those first journeys short.
- Alcohol will most likely affect you more than it used to before your injury. NEVER DRINK AND DRIVE. More information on the effect that drinking alcohol can have after brain injury is available in our publication [Alcohol after brain injury](#).
- Check with your GP about the possible side effects of any medication you are taking, particularly if this has been started recently or the dose has been altered.
- You may find that you get more tired than usual. Do not drive when you are fatigued. Plan your journey to take account of your best time of day. For more information on coping with fatigue, see our publication [Fatigue after brain injury](#).
- Plan your route before you set off, including places to stop for breaks on longer journeys.

Use a satellite navigation device and be sure to set your route before you start driving. This removes the need to constantly think about your route while driving.

- Be prepared to alter your plans if you do not feel well enough or alert enough to drive that day.

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- Check the car for fuel and water levels and tyre tread before your journey, especially if you are planning a long journey.
- Have adequate breakdown cover, and take a mobile phone with you (with credit, and charged).
- If you receive the higher rate mobility component of Disability Living Allowance (DLA), or scored 8 or more points in the 'moving around' area of a Personal Independence Payment (PIP) assessment, you will be entitled to a 'Blue Badge' for free parking. More information on the Blue Badge scheme can be found on the Citizens Advice website or by contacting your nearest Citizens Advice centre.
- Inform your insurance company of any modifications to your vehicle or any changes in your condition which could affect your policy.

Remember, if there is anything else which may affect your ability to drive, if you develop any other condition, or if an existing condition gets worse, you **MUST** inform the licensing authority.

If you are not allowed to keep your license

If the licensing authority does not feel it would be safe for you to drive, they will withdraw your licence. You have the right to appeal against this decision, and the relevant authority will tell you how to do this.

Being refused a licence does not necessarily mean that it will be refused forever. With time and re-learning of skills, along with possible adaptations to the vehicle, it may be possible to regain a driving licence.

Feelings about being unable to drive

Being able to drive is viewed by many as essential and as a right, so the impact of not being able to drive can have unexpected consequences. The removal of one's freedom to drive may lead to feelings of anger, frustration and resentment, as well as social isolation and difficulty finding appropriate employment.

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This is in addition to the existing problems being faced in adjusting to a change in personal circumstances. People living in more rural areas may find that public transport provision is poor, taxis are expensive and family and friends may be unable to always help out by driving them around.

It is important that family and friends are aware of this potential effect on the self-esteem of the person with a brain injury. At the same time, family members may need to be firm and support the removal of the driving licence.

One common effect of brain injury is a loss of insight into one's own situation. The person with a brain injury may simply be unable to accept or understand why they are no longer considered safe to drive, when they do not see any problems with their abilities or behaviour. Rehabilitation therapy and attending a support group, such as a local Headway group or branch, can help people with this. More information on loss of insight is available in our publication [*Insight and awareness issues after brain injury*](#).

Tips for coping without a driving license

- *Use local transport*

You might be able to apply for a disabled person's bus pass or railcard, which could give you access to free travel by bus or a third off train tickets for two people, so can also include a family member, friend or carer. You can get more information or apply by contacting your local Citizens Advice centre or by visiting www.disabledpersons-railcard.co.uk.

If you need to travel by train and require assistance, contact the train company in advance to ask for arrangements to be made. Every train company will have a policy outlining how they support disabled passengers, so you could ask for a copy of this to see how they can help.

Some councils run a Dial-a-Ride scheme, which provides accessible transport for people who struggle to use a bus because of a disability. To see whether your council offers this service, contact your local council or visit their website.

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- ***Get support from family and friends***

If family and friends are helping out with transport, try to make travel arrangements well in advance and encourage them to make a note of this in a diary so that they don't forget.

Some Headway groups can travel out to visit brain injury survivors in their own home as part of their outreach service if the survivor is unable to travel themselves. You can find contact details of your nearest Headway group or branch at www.headway.org.uk/supportingyou/in-your-area/ to ask whether they can make such arrangements.

- ***Getting to work***

If you are struggling to get to work without a car, ask a colleague who you trust if they can give you a lift.

Talk to your employer if you are struggling to get to work. Employers have a legal duty to make 'reasonable adjustments' to the workplace to support a disabled employee under The Equality Act (2010) in England, Scotland and Wales and the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) in Northern Ireland. This could include making adjustments such as changing working hours or allowing you to work from home on some days.

You might be eligible to support from the government scheme Access to Work, which is a grant that can help with getting to and from work. This is only available in England, Wales and Scotland. More information is available at www.gov.uk/accessto-work. A similar scheme is available in Northern Ireland called Access to Work (NI). More information on this is available at www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/access-work-practical-help-work.

- ***Consider shopping online***

If you are unable to get to shops, consider shopping online. Most items are available to buy online nowadays, including groceries, although this can

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sometimes be more costly so consider this option carefully.

If you have not yet learned to drive

When applying for a provisional driving licence, you must inform the licensing authority that you have had a brain injury. If you receive or have applied for the mobility component of the benefit Personal Independence Payment, you will be able to apply for a provisional licence at 16 years of age, instead of the normal age of 17.

The following points will help when applying for a new driving licence after a brain injury:

- In England, Scotland and Wales, apply to the DVLA for a provisional driving licence. There is a fee for applying for a provisional license, whether you do this online or by post. More information on fees and how to apply is available at www.gov.uk/apply-first-provisional-driving-licence, or from some Post Office branches.
- In Northern Ireland you need to complete a DL1 application form, which is available in many Post Office branches or MOT test centres. There is a fee for applying for a provisional driving license. For more information on fees and how to apply, visit www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/applyprovisional-driving-licence.
- A DVLA or DVA medical adviser will consider your application and the medical information you have provided. They may then decide to issue a provisional licence, ask for further information, contact your doctor and/or consultant or ask you to attend a medical examination.
- In the Channel Islands and Isle of Man you will need to contact the relevant authority for information.
- The process of medical checking and handling takes time, so if you want to start driving as soon as you are legally able, it is wise to apply for your provisional driving licence two or three months before your birthday.

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- You will take the same driving test as every other candidate, regardless of your impairment or condition.
- When you book your test, let the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA) in England, Scotland and Wales, or the DVA in Northern Ireland, know about any physical disabilities you have. You may be allowed extra time for the test, in order to explain to your examiner any adaptations you use, and to allow you extra time to get in and out of the car.
- Once you have passed your driving test, you may be entitled to receive a car through the Motability Scheme.

If you or your family feel that a brain injury may have affected your ability to learn to drive, it may be useful to have a driving ability assessment. This may seem expensive initially, but could save you money in the long run by telling you whether your injury is likely to affect your ability to learn to drive, before you pay for lessons. It could also provide helpful information to your driving instructor.

Financial assistance

If you need help to meet the costs of driving then the following may be worth contacting:

- In the UK, the Motability Scheme can help you with leasing or buying a car if you are in receipt of certain welfare benefits. Even if you do not drive yourself, you can apply for a car as a passenger and propose two other people as your drivers. The scheme can help with insurance, servicing, tyres, breakdown cover and adaptations to vehicles.
- Local and national charities might be able to offer financial assistance to help with the costs of driving.
- The organisation Turn2Us can help you find grants and benefits. Visit www.turn2us.org.uk for further information and to search for financial assistance using their online grant calculator.
- Local services such as the Round Table, Rotary, Lions Club, or church groups.

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- Your insurance company, if the cause of your injury is the subject of a compensation claim. Ask your solicitor for advice.
- The Royal British Legion, for people who have links with the Armed Forces.
- Local Authority Social Services may be able to help.
- The Headway helpline can provide details of all the above and may be able to find other sources of support. The helpline is available on 0808 800 2244 or helpline@headway.org.uk from Monday – Friday, 9am-5pm.

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As a charity, we rely on donations from people like you to continue being able to provide free information to those affected by brain injury. To donate, or find out how else you can get involved with supporting our work, visit www.headway.org.uk/get-involved.

If you would like to leave feedback for this publication, please consider completing our short survey at www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/hwpublications or contact us at publications@headway.org.uk.

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