

Katie Johnson: Good morning, and welcome to Apple a Day, Lake Region Healthcare's health and wellness program, where we feature news and information you can use to live a healthier life. I'm Katie Johnson, your host. My guest today is Lisa Cole. She is an occupational therapist in the Rehab Therapies department at Lake Region Healthcare, and she heads up the driver rehabilitation program here at Lake Region. Good morning, Lisa.

Lisa Cole: Good morning.

Katie Johnson: We are here to talk about driver rehab, and in particular, December marks a week where nationally we talk about older driver safety awareness. I think we all agree growing older is a privilege, but it's one that can come with some challenges. One of them might be staying mobile and having access to transportation that allows people to be active in the community. Their ability to drive safely is a big component of that.

Lisa, let's talk a little bit about Older Driver Safety Awareness Week to start out with. What's the purpose of commemorating such a week?

Lisa Cole: Yeah, really, Older Driver Safety Awareness Week really talks about creating an awareness of some of the challenges that face our senior drivers and then the education and safety resources that are available to help, including those right here at Lake Region Healthcare.

Katie Johnson: I think it is one of those little known services that we offer and such an important resource for people to know that there are people here who can help with this challenging time. What are some of the common changes that drivers should be mindful of, or their family members should be mindful of, as they age?

Lisa Cole: Yeah, there's actually a lot of different things that can happen as we age. Unfortunately, some of those things aren't as pleasant as other things that we might encounter. But a few of things that we look at when we're look at driving is ... one of the big things, reaction time. As we age, we just don't quite move as fast as we used to, whether it be that we have some joint stiffness, pain. Just our bodies don't react as fast.

Other things that we can encounter would be like when you're driving at night, just the glare of other vehicles is more challenging. Even if you don't drive very often, even going out then at a later time, you're just not used to that. That can be challenging, as well.

Other times, we have different injuries or disease processes that occur as we age that can definitely impair driving. Some of those things are all things we need to look at when we go behind the wheel.

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Katie Johnson: Sometimes it's not something we recognize in ourselves. It might be adult children who first recognize these changes in their parents or another loved one. If someone notices that a loved one, their mom or dad, isn't driving as well, what advice do you have for starting that sometimes difficult conversation or things not to do?

Lisa Cole: Yeah, that really is a difficult conversation to have with parents, because as we sit as their children, we see some of those things maybe not going as well as they used to in their lives. One of those is driving. I certainly tell people be honest. Sit and have a conversation. Definitely don't be blaming and accusing. Just say, "You know, mom or dad, this is something I've been noticing. Are you noticing any of these changes? Is this something that maybe we need to address? Could we talk to the doctor about it?" Obviously, not everybody's as receptive as others, so sometimes that can be a difficult conversation. Then sometimes that needs to come from the physician, maybe to address that with mom or dad.

Katie Johnson: I think that's one of the main benefits of having a program like this is knowing that you don't have to be the one to make that decision. There's a professional resource that can help you. Naturally, the holidays are a time when we're together. Maybe there are adult children that are home that aren't usually home, that this is a good time to have that conversation and then call in that professional resource.

Lisa Cole: For sure. For sure. A lot of times the physician will then refer that over to me for a driving evaluation, which is something that we do right here at Lake Region Healthcare. Then we get a real in-depth evaluation just to really assess the abilities, whether someone is safe to drive or not.

Katie Johnson: You mentioned that assessment. I think it would be helpful to talk through what is a senior assessment? How does it happen? What are the steps that happen once you make that call?

Lisa Cole: Certainly we can receive an order from a physician. Sometimes that just happens when people go in for their physicals or have an appointment with their doctor. That conversation is brought up and does come up quite frequently. Then what would happen is the doctor would make a referral over to the occupational therapy department, to myself for a driving evaluation.

We can also do it in a different way. If a family member or caregiver does have questions, they can certainly call me and talk a little bit about the assessment. Then I can aid them in getting that assessment referral from the physician so that the loved one doesn't need to go in necessarily to see the doctor. Once we get that referral, it's a two-part assessment.

The first part is done in the clinic where I am looking at reaction time. I look at your vision. I spend a lot of time on memory and cognition, because unfortunately, as we age, our minds aren't as sharp as they used to be. I also look at just general physical abilities. Are you able to rotate your neck and turn to

look in the mirrors? Are you able to react fast enough on the gas and the brake pedal? I look at all of those things. Then in some instances, it's worthy of looking at some adaptive equipment for a vehicle to ensure someone can stay on the road a little bit longer.

Katie Johnson: Sure, so the first part is that clinical assessment. Then there is a second component?

Lisa Cole: Yes, and so then once we get done with a clinical assessment, if everything goes well in the clinic, and I don't want to say there's a pass or fail, but there kind of is, there is some requirements that need to be met before we go out into the vehicle.

Then we set up a second appointment, which is done behind the wheel. We have a vehicle here at Lake Region that has an instructor brake in it and some adaptive equipment if people are going to need that. We then would go out into the vehicle, and we drive for about an hour.

Typically, we'd do all areas in Fergus Falls here. We will go out in the country, on the interstate. Certainly if people never drive on the interstate, I'm not going to make them do that during their assessment. There are some instances that I do go to some of the surrounding towns. If people only drive in Pelican Rapids, or they only drive in Underwood, or Battle Lake, I will go to those towns. We will do that behind the wheel assessment in their home environment.

Katie Johnson: It's nice that it's that personalized. Another question I think of when you think of that is, how long does it take from the time that you make that phone call to be able to have the assessment?

Lisa Cole: Typically, I can get people in within one to two weeks. Of course, there are always some other circumstances that can play a part in that too, but the timeframe from which somebody calls me or I get the referral is usually within about two weeks.

Katie Johnson: Is there any certain qualification to qualify for this type of assessment? Another question would be cost of an assessment.

Lisa Cole: Certainly if you have concern for your driving, or if a loved one has concerns, really, all I need is that doctor's referral. Usually it's a visit with me on the phone first. Then we talk about the needs and what you are seeing with your driving or with your loved one's driving.

Unfortunately, this assessment does have a fee. It is not covered by insurance, so there is a \$300 fee for the full assessment. That does involve both the clinical and the behind the wheel portion of testing. Unfortunately, insurance doesn't pay for that. I always try and tell people that's a small price to pay when we look at ensuring the safety of ourselves out on the road and then everyone else around us when we're driving.

Katie Johnson: It really doesn't seem like a big fee when you think of it in that perspective, the cost of just once accident, of preventing that with that \$300 investment seems certainly worthwhile. For those who are questioning whether or not they are safe to drive themselves, or to continue driving themselves, or seeing that in others, what kind of tips do you have, things to look for?

Lisa Cole: Certainly when you're in your vehicle, just making sure that you are seated properly in your vehicle. Taking a look, can you see in your mirrors? Can you rotate to see in that blind spot when you're out on the road? Are you having any difficulties with that? There are a lot of adaptive equipment ideas that we can help to provide that to have you safer in the car.

I always tell people as they age, it's always a benefit to you to attend the 55 Alive classes that are offered in our communities. They give you a lot of good tips for when you're driving. I also know that there's a little insurance benefit on that when you take those classes.

There is a couple other brochures and things that we have too that are also beneficial to look at and go through. They are put out by The Hartford. There's a couple of them that I have on hand. One of them is talking with a loved one regarding driving. Another one is on driving and dementia. Unfortunately, that is something we see a lot as we age, just our memory having those impairments. There are some resources to look at before you come in.

Certainly if you have any questions, feel free to give me a call at Lake Region Healthcare, OT department. Our number is 736-8388. Just ask for Lisa.

Katie Johnson: Those Hartford resources you mentioned, is that something they get from you, or can they find those online?

Lisa Cole: Actually, you can find those online at thehartford.com. They actually have a lot of brochures that they will mail you. I believe they are free of charge. I also have some of those within our department that I can hand out to people, as well.

Katie Johnson: Such great resources and information for older drivers and those who care about older drivers to help keep them safe on the road. It's not about taking away a privilege. It's about making sure that all of the adaptive equipment, assistive pieces that might be available to help an older driver stay on the road longer safely, are really taken into consideration. The driver rehab program at Lake Region Healthcare, again, call anytime, 736-8388. Ask for Lisa Cole, and she can help you get on the road safely and stay on the road safely.

During Older Driver Safety Awareness Week, again, my guest, Lisa Cole, from Occupational Therapy at Lake Region Healthcare and the Driver Rehabilitation program. Thanks for your time today, Lisa.

Lisa Cole: Thank you, Katie.

Katie Johnson: Lisa and Katie remind you there is so much to do here. Stay healthy for it. Have a great day.