

Driving is often an important part of a person's lifestyle, representing freedom and independence. Driving, however, is a complex task, involving our physical ability, vision, cognitive ability and emotional skills. Any changes or loss of function in any one of these abilities due to ageing, illness or injury may affect a person's ability to drive. Sometimes people are not aware of changes in their abilities and need to be guided by their health professionals and family as to whether there may be concerns about their driving ability.

Occupational Therapists (OTs) work to help people be as independent as possible in the activities of their everyday life. All OTs are registered health professionals.

Your Legal Responsibility

Driving is a privilege not a right. The privilege to drive comes with certain responsibilities. One of those responsibilities is to ensure that you are medically fit to drive. In NSW, the RMS is responsible for ensuring all drivers are medically fit to drive. The law requires all licensed drivers to report directly to the RMS any long term or permanent medical condition that is likely to affect their ability to drive. Failure to report and choosing to drive may put lives at risk and may result in serious legal and financial consequences, including loss of insurance cover.

When reporting a medical condition, the RMS will request a medical report from your treating doctor or specialist. Your doctor may recommend to the RMS that you undertake an OT driving assessment to determine if the medical condition impacts on your ability to drive safely and legally.

What does an OT Driving Assessment Involve?

OTs who conduct driving assessments have completed specialised post-graduate training. They understand how important driving is for a person's life and try to make the process as simple and stress-free as possible. Ultimately the OT's goal is to keep people driving for as long as they are safe to do so.

What is needed?

- A medical report from your treating doctor or specialist indicating your medical clearance to drive, your medical condition and the need for an OT driving assessment;
- An eyesight report from an optometrist or ophthalmologist may also be required;
- A current driver's licence or learner's permit; and
- Glasses, contact lenses and/or hearing aids if required.

Off-Road Assessment:

This involves an interview and clinical assessment which may include:

- Your medical background;
- Your driving history;
- Your vision;
- Your physical abilities;
- Decision making and judgement skills related to driving; and
- General practical knowledge of road law.

This assessment may take up to 2 hours.

On-Road Assessment:

- The assessment occurs in a dual controlled car with a qualified driving instructor and the driver trained OT. This may be in an automatic or manual car, depending upon what you are used to driving or what your medical condition requires.
- Completing an on-road driving assessment can be a stressful experience. You will be given time to become familiar with the vehicle at the start of the assessment. The assessment usually begins in quiet streets, progressing to more complex areas.
- The on-road assessment takes approximately 1 – 1 ½ hours.
- If vehicle modifications are required (e.g. steering aid, left foot accelerator, hand controls) the equipment is fitted to the assessment vehicle and trialled.
- Assessments for buses, trucks, motorbikes and forklifts can be completed by some specialised driver trained OTs.

Feedback:

Immediately following the assessment, the OT will provide feedback regarding the impact of your medical condition on your ability to drive safely and according to RMS legal requirements.

Reporting:

A report detailing the driving assessment outcome and recommendations is sent to the referring doctors and the RMS Medical Unit. The RMS Medical Unit has specially trained staff responsible for making a decision regarding a person's licence status based on the results and recommendations of the medical and OT driving assessment report.

Possible Outcomes of an OT Driving Assessment:

There are a number of recommendations that can result from the assessment. These include:

- Fit to drive with no other intervention;
- Fit to drive with certain conditions such as a limited distance from home, driving only in daylight hours or driving an automatic vehicle only;
- Driving lessons to learn compensatory techniques, to regain confidence or to upgrade driving skills;
- Driving lessons to learn competency in driving with specialised vehicle modifications such as a steering aid, hand controls or a left foot accelerator. To drive legally with specialised vehicle modifications a person must have the modifications endorsed on their licence. They will be required to undertake an RMS Disability Driving Test to prove competency and safety driving with the modifications;
- Suspension of the licence whilst waiting for further recovery; or
- Unfit to drive, with licence cancellation.

At times a person may be issued with a learner's licence in order to complete the driving assessment or driving tuition.

Ongoing OT driving assessments:

An on-road re-assessment may be necessary to assess a person's progress following driving lessons.

Further OT re-assessments may also be required if a progressive medical condition is involved, such as dementia and / or Parkinson's Disease.

Costs Involved:

Fees for an OT driving assessment can vary. The cost for the assessment is not covered by the RMS. Medicare and/or private health insurance rebates may be available in some situations.

Any costs for vehicle modifications and/or lessons with a licensed driving instructor are not included as part of the OT assessment costs.

Appointment Availability:

Waiting times for driving assessments can vary from a few weeks to a few months. The driver trained OT involved can liaise with the RMS Medical Unit if there are issues with licence expiry dates while waiting for the assessment to be completed.

How to find a Driver Trained Occupational Therapist?

Occupational Therapy Australia NSW has a list of driver trained OTs throughout NSW, both hospital based and those OTs in private practice.

Contact details are:

Phone: (02) 9648 3225

Email: info.nsw@otaus.com.au

Website: www.ausot.com.au

OT Australia NSW Driving Interest Group
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OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY DRIVING ASSESSMENT AND RETRAINING

