



## Driving with Adaptations

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When you have a physical disability, driving a car may seem like an unreachable goal. Though it may not be possible to accommodate every type of disability, there are several adaptations that can make driving a reality. If driving seems like a responsibility you are ready to take on, there are several steps you can take to find accommodations fit for your needs.

**Driver Education:** Just like people without disabilities, the first step in the driving process is a driver's education course. This class, which can be taken either in a classroom or on-line outlines the rules of the road that every driver needs to know. Regardless of your disability, this class can possibly be taken in the same setting and style as any able-bodied person who would take the class.

**Learner Permit:** Once you have completed the driver's education course, you are eligible to earn your learner permit. Like driver ed, this is a necessary step regardless of disability. This is a written test, testing your knowledge of the rules of the road. This test is administered at your local DMV (Department of Motor Vehicles). There you will also take your identification picture, and a vision test. (Though driving is a possibility for many people with disabilities, those who can not pass the vision test will not be eligible to drive).

**Driving Evaluation:** This is where the process for a driver with a disability becomes different and more challenging than that of an able-bodied driver. Though you have proved you know the rules of the road through your permit test, the DMV wants to assure that your disability does not affect your ability to drive safely. Several hospitals and rehabilitation centers administer driving evaluations. This is often administered by an occupational therapist who will test skills necessary for driving, such as vision, hearing, reaction time, cognitive responses and depth perception. From your performance of these various tasks, it will be determined if you need any accommodations to drive safely.

**Behind the Wheel Evaluation:** If during the evaluation you demonstrate the skills needed to drive, you will be taken for a behind the wheel evaluation. Often the same rehabilitation center that offers the evaluation will likely offer an array of vehicles with various adaptations to see which works for you. During this evaluation, you will be taken to a parking lot or low-traffic area to test your



driving skills. Often a physical and occupational therapist will accompany you and the certified driving instructor to take notes on the driving they observe. It may be required that this person teach you how to drive in an adapted vehicle used for this purpose.

### **Types of Vehicle Accommodations:**

- **Hand Controls:** Hand controls are for drivers with disabilities who cannot safely drive with either of their legs. They allow the driver to control both the gas and break with their hands. They are available in a variety of different styles, and work differently to fit the needs of the individual.
- **Left Foot Gas Pedal:** Some drivers have a disability that affects one side of their body. If this is the case, a left foot gas pedal can be installed so the driver can safely use the gas/break with their left foot instead of the right.
- **Pedal Extensions:** For drivers of shorter stature who cannot reach the pedals, pedal extensions can be installed so they can operate the gas/break.
- **Spinner Knob:** For drivers who have a hard time holding the steering wheel, this is a knob that a person can hold with one hand and can be used to control steering. (Please note: in many states spinner knobs are illegal because they are used in drag racing to make tight turns, so make sure you get any permit or doctor notification that is needed.)

Besides just controlling the vehicle, drivers might need adaptations to help get in and out of the vehicle or to transfer their equipment. For these needs, there are driver seat accommodations and wheelchair ramps and lifts. There are also many more complex driving accommodations that include things like computer controls if you have issues with reaching headlights, climate controls, etc.; a joystick steering wheel; as well as many other options. Your local rehabilitation center or center for independent living will have more details about these options.

**Getting A Vehicle:** After the type of adaption needed is determined, the next step is purchasing a vehicle that fits your needs. For many wheelchair users, this may be a van with a wheelchair lift, but that is not always the case. Usually it is most helpful to tour a car dealership to investigate different kinds of cars. After you have selected a car that will work to fit your accommodations, it can be taken to an adaption center where the adaptations will be installed. Also, many dealerships and catalogs specialize in the sale of already adapted vehicles.



If you are under 18, it may be necessary to take **Behind the Wheel Lessons** with a certified driving instructor. They can use your specially adapted car, or one that is used for this purpose, to drive with you, teaching you how to properly control the car. (Behind the wheel lessons can be taken in the adapted vehicle through a local driving school.) Depending on your state, your department of rehabilitation services may have an adapted vehicle for you to practice in. Someone from the department will likely teach you how to drive the adapted vehicle.

Once you have completed your “Behind the Wheel”, it is still necessary to practice with a licensed driver over the age of 25. They can provide feedback and give you much needed experience behind the wheel. Once you and the licensed driver feel ready for you to drive on your own, you can take a driving test at the DMV, and earn your freedom on the road!

Learning to drive with a disability can sometimes be a slow and frustrating process. Your disability may make it hard for you to catch on fast, or the adaptations may be hard to use. It is important to be patient and persistent, knowing that the more you practice, the better driver you will be. Though you may drive differently than others, accommodations are available to maximize your ability and help you to accomplish your goal of becoming a licensed driver!

Resources:

<http://www.familyvillage.wisc.edu/at/driving.htm>

Resource list of adaptations and other information

[www.driversed.com](http://www.driversed.com)

Research local driving school or online courses

<http://familyvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/What-is-a-CIL.pdf>

KASA’s *What is a Center for Independent Living*

<http://familyvoices.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Dreaming-About-Driving.pdf>

KASA’s Article: *Dreaming About Driving*

You may also contact your local physical rehabilitation center or center for independent living.

*This tip sheet was written by Allison Cardwell with review and edits by national KASA’s Board and Task Force.*