

Thousands more older drivers ruled medically unfit

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The Duke of Edinburgh, 97, gave up his driving licence after a crash in January INDIGO/GETTY IMAGES

The number of older drivers banned from the road on medical grounds has increased by almost 150 per cent in a decade, prompting calls for an overhaul of licensing regulations.

Figures obtained by *The Times* show that almost 22,500 over-70s had their licences revoked last year for failing to meet medical standards.

The rise in medical bans for older motorists has outstripped the total for other age groups over nine years. It is also disproportionately higher than the overall increase in the number of over-70s on the road during the same period.

The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency figures, which were released under freedom of information laws, prompted calls yesterday for changes to regulations surrounding fitness to drive on British roads.

Last night, the government confirmed that a review was under way and an action plan for older drivers would be published this year.

At present licences expire when motorists reach 70 and have to be renewed every three years. Drivers have to declare that their eyesight meets legal standards and flag up other relevant medical conditions. However, there are no compulsory assessments.

According to the figures, 61,482 car and motorbike licences were revoked on medical grounds last year, up by 116.8 per cent since 2010. The rate has risen by 104 per cent among under-70s. This is usually a result of voluntary disclosures or follow-up assessments.

Over the same period, the number of licences for over-70s removed on medical grounds increased by 142 per cent from 9,265 to 22,453.

In all, 5.3 million over-70s now have a licence, representing about two thirds of the population, up from just 39 per cent in the mid-1990s.

Debate over the issue intensified after a crash involving the Duke of Edinburgh in January. His Land Rover overturned when it collided with a Kia near Sandringham. The duke, who is 97, gave up his driving licence three weeks later.

A spokesman for Brake, the road safety group, said: “The government needs to look at how fitness to drive regulation can be more rigorously enforced, such as compulsory eyesight testing throughout a driver’s career.”

Edmund King, the AA president, said evidence of regular eye tests for those aged over 70 was needed as well as firmer guidelines for GPs.

However, Caroline Abrahams, the charity director for Age UK, said: “There are more older drivers on the road today than ever before and overall their safety record is very good, in fact on average they are less likely to have an accident than younger drivers.

“For many older people, driving is crucial to maintaining independence so it’s important that they should not be prevented from getting behind the wheel by their age alone.”

A Department for Transport spokeswoman said: “All drivers over 70 have to renew their licence every three years, but age on its own is not a barrier to safe driving. The government will deliver a refreshed road safety statement this year, as well as a two-year action plan to address four priority user groups — older road users, rural road users, young people and motorcyclists.”