

Elderly ‘driven to early grave’ by giving up cars

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Speed limits could be brought down to accommodate older drivers, an expert suggested Photo ANDREW MATTHEWS/PA

Older drivers are among the safest road users in the country and making them give up their cars could send some of them to an early grave, an expert has warned.

“Giving up driving is associated with a huge deterioration in health and wellbeing and may even be linked to speeding up death,” Charles Musselwhite, associate professor of gerontology at Swansea University, said.

“Older people make up 5 per cent of pedestrian activity yet account for 30 per cent of pedestrian deaths and 18 per cent of [those] killed or seriously injured. Crossings are poorly

designed for older people and do not allow enough time to cross for over 90 per cent of older people.”



Speaking at the British Science Festival, Dr Musselwhite also suggested that speed limits could be brought down to give older drivers longer to react and that overtaking on some roads could be restricted to designated passing places.

Dr Musselwhite said that old age brings with it deteriorations in eyesight, working memory and cognitive processing speed, and that older drivers often inadvertently break the unspoken rules of the road because of the extra time they need to make manoeuvres. The frustration this causes is a significant source of accidents.

The death rate among drivers in their 70s is lower than the death rate for drivers aged between 17 and 30, according to Department for Transport figures.

Yet in spite of their relatively good safety record, elderly drivers are more liable to make mistakes when they are put under pressure.

“What you get on the road is a bunch of laws, but that’s only one level of it,” Dr Musselwhite said. “Actually, what everyone drives to is a bunch of norms. These are unwritten rules that you only really learn after your test and which you pick up daily as you go about interacting with other bits of traffic.

“Older people often buck those norms, they do something a little bit different or unusual and that upsets people.”

Dr Musselwhite said there was a case for trying to manage this conflict because the number of drivers in their eighth, ninth and tenth decades was projected to increase dramatically over the next few decades.

There are presently four million people aged over 70 with driving licences on Britain’s roads. As life expectancies increase, 90 per cent of men in this age group are forecast to be on the roads by 2030.

Currently all drivers over the age of 70 must re-apply for their licences every three years and politicians frequently come under pressure to make them retake their driving tests.

The AA has published guidance suggesting that people should continue to drive as long as they feel able to do so.