

DRIVING a car with Autism

The technical facts in this information sheet are UK based, but the basic should apply virtually anywhere! ☺

As autism is a spectrum disorder it is impossible to say that people with autism either should or should not be allowed to drive. Some people with autism may find this skill extremely difficult to grasp, whilst others will be highly competent drivers.

However, the diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) should not be a barrier to holding a licence. But, when a disabled person applies for a driving licence they are expected to declare their disability on their application.

Driving licences

Application for a provisional license

The normal minimum age for driving is 17 but if you are getting Disability Living Allowance (DLA) higher rate mobility you can learn to drive at 16.

The rules that require you to disclose a diagnosis of an ASD and procedure for applying for a driving licence can be found on the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) website:

<http://www.dvla.gov.uk/medical.aspx> for England, Scotland and Wales, and on www.nidirect.gov.uk for Northern Ireland. If you do not disclose your diagnosis at the time of application you could be fined up to £1000. You could be prosecuted if you are involved in an accident.

In the case of autistic spectrum disorders, barriers to holding a licence might include a history of epilepsy, perceptual problems, difficulties with multi-tasking, poor motor control or dyspraxia and problems with sequencing. These should not be an absolute barrier to gaining a licence but you will need to be aware that they may present difficulties.

Rules regarding fitness to drive

Initially it may be worth discussing the plan to learn to drive with your GP (Family Practitioner). Your GP will have access to the DVLA guidelines for people with a disability and will be able to go through these with you. The at-a-glance guide to the current medical standards of fitness to drive can be accessed at: www.dft.gov.uk/dvla//medical/aag. The medical standards specifically consider the impulsivity and behaviour that can be present in autism and Asperger syndrome in relation to fitness to drive. However, each case is judged on an individual basis.

It may also be worth contacting the DVLA medical adviser to discuss this further. Please see the 'Useful contacts' section on this page. For similar information about medical standards in Northern Ireland, visit www.nidirect.gov.uk .

Epilepsy

The fitness to drive medical rules regarding epilepsy are dependent on the time period since the last seizure and the type of the seizures experienced. Further information about changes in the regulations made in March 2013 can be found on the Epilepsy Society website at

<http://www.epilepsysociety.org.uk/AboutEpilepsy/Livingwithpilepsy/Drivingandtravel/Drivingandtransport>

Please speak to your GP or refer to the DVLA guide for more details.

Decision on whether to grant a licence

The decision may be made on the information you provide in your medical questionnaire when initially applying for a licence, or further information may be requested from your GP or consultant. You will have provided consent for this on your medical questionnaire. If further information is needed the medical adviser may:

- Contact your GP or consultant. If your doctor doesn't see you very often then you might wish to specify another professional who knows you better, to provide you with a supporting statement. This could be a psychologist or psychiatrist or your social worker.
- Arrange an examination with a locally appointed medical officer/local consultant/specialist.
- Ask you to undergo a driving assessment/test. The UK forum of mobility centres can provide an initial off-road assessment to determine the likelihood of learning to drive and the time period it could take. This can be done before sending off the application so that you know what to expect, if the licence is granted. Please see the 'Mobility' section for contact details.

Time limits

If the decision is made on the information you provide it can take approximately 15 days to make a decision in most cases. If further information is needed from you, your GP or other professionals, or if you are applying for a lorry or bus licence, the decision can take approximately 90 days.

When the licence is issued it may be conditional, ie only valid for one, two or three years and dependent on the person's condition not deteriorating. However, if you have autism your condition is unlikely to get any worse so you should be issued with a licence which will last until you are 70.

Drivers with a licence who are considering getting a diagnosis

If a person who already has a driving licence develops a disability or if an existing disability becomes more acute (which may be the reason for seeking diagnosis), the DVLA needs to be informed. You will need to fill out a medical questionnaire and the medical advisers at the DVLA will decide whether or not you can satisfy the national medical guidelines. A licence is accordingly retained or revoked.

Refusal or revoked licence

If a licence is revoked or an application is refused due to medical standards not being met, you will be provided with a medical explanation for the decision and, when possible, informed about when you can re-apply. You have the right to appeal against the decision to refuse or revoke your licence to the Magistrate's court (in England and Wales) or a Sheriff court (in Scotland). You must appeal within six months of the decision and you must inform the DVLA before you appeal to the court.

You may want to seek help from your local Citizens Advice Bureau or from a solicitor, if you are unable to conduct the appeal yourself. For further details please see the Disability Law Service's *A Guide to Driving Licences* on <http://www.dls.org.uk/>

Financial help with buying a car and driving lessons

If a person is in receipt of the higher rate mobility component of Disability Living Allowance (DLA), or the enhanced rate of the mobility component of Personal Independence Payment (PIP), they are eligible to join the Motability scheme. When a person joins the Motability scheme the higher rate mobility component of DLA/PIP is paid directly to Motability and in return, the person can lease or purchase a vehicle through the scheme.

The Motability scheme can also help with the cost of driving lessons. Only individuals who are currently a Motability customer, or intend to be a customer once they have passed their test, will be entitled to help with the cost of driving lessons. Motability customers can also apply for help towards the cost of driving lessons for a nominated driver or carer if they are unable to drive themselves. Only one person per Motability customer can normally be helped with the cost of driving lessons.

Contact details for the Motability scheme can be found in the 'Mobility' section on this page.

Learning to drive

The UK Forum of Mobility Centres has details of instructors who are qualified to teach people with disabilities, and may also have their own accredited staff. Please see the 'Mobility' section of this page.

Before taking lessons you may want to observe traffic when travelling around and even watch driving videos that may help you to become more aware of the rules of the road and methods of driving.

It may help when you first start driving lessons to take information with you about autism spectrum disorders so that your instructor can understand your needs and adapt strategies which may help your understanding. You may want to explain any sensory issues you have, for instance, if you have problems with glare from the sun or from headlights.

It may be worthwhile asking for things to be written down or drawn when being explained to you, if you feel this would help. As some people with an ASD can have difficulty with concentrating for long periods of time, you may want to request that you have frequent breaks during lessons and that information is broken down in to small parts for you. Your instructor may need to use physical cues to help you with estimating speed and distance.

Learning to drive is a challenge for everyone. As Marc Segar (a man with Asperger syndrome) says:

“Driving is quite a bizarre skill to learn. How fast you pick up driving has nothing to do with your intelligence in other things. Some real dimwits are able to learn to drive in as few as five lessons whereas some really intelligent people can need as many as fifty lessons.”

Remember that you can take your time over learning to drive; very few people pick it up very quickly. Try and get as much practice in as you can with someone you feel comfortable with.

Some of the skills you will be picking up will be very new so do not anticipate a smooth learning curve. If you have always had problems with sequencing, you may find it very hard to get into the routine of

checking everything before pulling away from the kerb the first few times you drive a car. However, this should become easier as you become more familiar with the routine. Because people with autism are often very good at following routines your instructor may find that you are a more reliable and consistent driver than most.

People with an ASD also tend to be good at following rules, such as those in the Highway Code. However, sometimes other drivers may make mistakes regarding the rules of the road and it is important to try and stay calm in these situations.

Driving tests

When booking your test it is important to inform the Driving Standards Agency of any special requirements.

The theory test

The theory test is available in spoken as well as written format. Test conditions can be adapted if you have light-sensitive epilepsy. Some drivers with disabilities can ask for extra time for the theory test. The Driving Standards Agency would need to be informed of the disability and needs relating to this when the test is being booked.

The practical test

Although you have a disability, you will still have to take the same test as everyone else and be able to show the same level of ability. However, some drivers with disabilities may be allowed extra time for their test.

Free road tax

You can get a free road tax disc if you receive DLA higher rate mobility or the enhanced mobility element of PIP. If you are not a driver or do not own a vehicle, it is possible to name a person to drive on your behalf (a nominee). The vehicle must be registered in your name or in the name of the nominee. For further information please see leaflet *V188: Exemption from Vehicle Excise Duty for disabled people*, available from main Post Office branches or from www.dft.gov.uk/dvla/forms/onlineleaflets . To apply for free road tax you will need to contact the Disability Benefits Unit for exemption certificate DLA 404.

Insurance

A car insurance company should be notified of a disability. Under the Equality Act 2010 (or Disability Discrimination Act 1995 in Northern Ireland), insurers can only charge disabled people higher premiums if the extra charge is based on factual or statistical data, or there are other relevant factors which indicate that a disabled person is at higher risk.

The NAS Autism Helpline does not know of any car insurance companies who are specifically aware of ASDs. We can only suggest that you check in detail the policy of individual insurance companies.

What to do if you have an accident

Hopefully this is something that you won't experience but if you do, it is something that you need to be prepared for. It is worth having written instructions in your car on what to do if an accident occurs that you

can refer to. It is also worth talking to your driving instructor about what is classed as an accident and in what situations the following action is appropriate.

- Stop at the scene of the accident and switch off your car's engine. Put on your hazard lights. Be careful when leaving your car, being aware of other traffic.
- The first thing to do if you have an accident is to try and stay calm. Maybe take some slow, deep breaths or use whatever anxiety-reducing methods may work for you.
- Call 999 (911) immediately if anyone is injured, if the collision scene is dangerous or if someone involved leaves the scene without exchanging the details required by law (more information on these details follows). You may also want to call an appropriate adult who may be able to help.
- It is useful to keep a disposable camera (or a camera phone), and a pen and paper in your car in case an accident does happen. Make a sketch or take a photo of the accident scene noting street names, vehicle locations, collision points and any damage to vehicles.
- Get the names, addresses and vehicle registrations of any witnesses, including passengers in the other vehicle(s) involved.
- Take down the registration number, make, model and colour of the other vehicle(s) involved in the accident. Drivers (including yourself) must then exchange their own details by law. This includes name, address, telephone number and insurance details (the name and address of each driver's insurance company, and insurance policy numbers if available).
- If the other car involved is parked and its driver isn't present, you must leave a note with your details on the car, perhaps under the windscreen wiper.
- You must then notify your insurance company of the accident.

A personal account by a person with a disability about the procedure following a car accident can be found at:

www.disabilitynow.org.uk/living/motoring/motoring_mar_2006.htm

By it's very nature, learning to drive can be a minefield for anyone, let alone someone with ASD! We hope that the information above provides you with some useful information and clarity! ☺