

Keeping you in the driver's seat



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▲ Tuokko

Ongoing studies investigate safety and fitness issues for seniors who drive

by Debbie Willis

Staying fit as you age has many benefits but here's one you probably haven't thought of—it may keep you driving longer.

That's what ongoing studies at UVic are suggesting. Over the last five years, Dr. Holly Tuokko, a UVic psychologist and researcher with the university's centre on aging, has been studying elderly drivers, including their attitudes toward driving, what motivates them to change their behaviour behind the wheel, and what factors affect their decision to stop driving.

"The percentage of the population over 65 is increasing, and so is the number of drivers in that group," says Tuokko. "It's a growing issue."

In a 2003 study called *Older and Wiser Driver*, 93 seniors self-assessed their driving skills, then participated in an information session about on-road safety and the use of alternative transportation. The volunteers in the study indicated a concern about health in relation to driving, and raised issues about medical symptoms, such as pain in the legs and feet.

"One study gives us some information, but then leads to more questions," says Tuokko, who last summer conducted another survey of 200 drivers between the ages of 65 and 80. They were asked questions about their medical condition, activity levels, and attitudes toward driving.

The questions also focused on which areas of driving people found difficult, such as pressing the brake

pedal, turning the wheel, or getting out of the car. Preliminary results suggest that many problems are related to lower-body movement.

"A fitness program designed to improve strength, endurance and flexibility in these problem areas may improve in-car performance," says Tuokko, who is working with Dr. Ryan Rhodes, a UVic exercise psychologist.

Tuokko is less interested in identifying poor drivers than in helping seniors drive safely or use alternate modes of transportation. She's using her research findings to develop educational material and information sessions that deal with issues of fitness, driver safety and other transportation options such as buses and volunteer drivers.

"We're focusing on the enhancement of older drivers," said Tuokko.

"But I've always felt that it's mobility we're dealing with. It's about keeping people moving."

Mostly, Tuokko hopes her work will lead to increased safety for seniors who drive, and an awareness that older drivers are not necessarily bad ones. "Age is equated with poor driving but I don't believe that's appropriate," she says. "I want the emphasis on driver age to be eliminated, and the focus to

be on safety."

Tuokko's research is funded by the Greater Victoria Capital Regional District Traffic Safety Commission, the Canadian Institute of Health Research through the Institute of Aging, the Canadian Driving Research Initiative for Vehicular Safety in the Elderly (CanDRIVE), and UVic.

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The proportion of elderly people living in Canada will rise from 12.6 per cent to 23 per cent by 2041, according to Statistics Canada. The number of older adults who drive will more than double over the next 20 years.

According to ICBC, older drivers make up 13.6 per cent of B.C.'s driving population, but are responsible for only 9.2 per cent of accidents and collisions causing death.

Seniors drive shorter distances than other age groups, but when crash rates are adjusted for distance driven, the injury and death rates for older drivers are similar to the high rates of young adults.

Researchers at UVic's centre on aging study the social and psychological aspects of aging, population health and health services delivery in partnership with seniors, their families, organizations, health care providers and the government. To find out more visit www.coag.uvic.ca.

The article below was written by Debbie Willis, a student in the departments of English and writing, as a participant in the UVic SPARK program (Students Promoting Awareness of Research Knowledge).



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