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Night driving can be a challenge for many

By KATHLEEN HOERSTEN QUIRK
Special to ADAMM

It was a dark and stormy night when suddenly bright headlights pierced through the windshield directly into the driver's eyes, blinding her for just a second.

That scenario may sound like the start of a bad suspense novel, but it's actually a regular occurrence for many older drivers.

The reality is that night vision in general deteriorates as drivers grow older, and the ability of the eyes to recover from sudden shifts from dark to light slows down, explains Jack Peet, traffic safety manager for AAA.

Older drivers may experience changes in visual acuity, contrast sensitivity, glare sensitivity, visual field, color vision, depth perception, focusing ability/inability, according to local optometrist Kellye Knueppel. They may also experience a reduction in the "useful field of view," which is the ability to detect, identify, and localize targets in a complex visual background.

"As we grow older, we need to change our driving habits," advises Mariann Muzzi, associate director of the American Association of Retired Persons for Wisconsin. And, she says, that's especially important because fatalities are higher in nighttime accidents.

However, according to Peet, Muzzi and other experts, older drivers can take steps to continue to drive safely.

Here are a few tips:

- Adjust your schedule so you don't have to drive as much at night, advises Peet. "Sometimes it's unavoidable, but try to limit it when you can."
 - When possible, adjust your route so you're on well-traveled streets with street lights - even if it takes you a little out of your way.
 - Keep your windshield clean inside and out. Clean frequently because the build-up of little smudges can turn the windows foggy and limit night vision.
- Joe Vicari, **HEISER Toyota Scion** service manager, recommends a new set of wiper inserts or blades before the winter get



The 2014 Impala headlamp technology makes night driving safer and easier.

worse, and using a good glass cleaner to help keep the windshield clean inside and out.

- Keep headlights clean. A 2012 Consumer Reports article noted that 80% of headlights they tested had lost effectiveness because of discoloration or haziness. Ask your dealer's service department for advice or use any of the headlight restoration products Consumer Reports tested. More information is at www.consumerreports.org/cro/headlight-restoration-kits/buying-guide.htm.

- Don't "overdrive" your headlights. In other words, reduce speed so you can see clearly what's ahead and don't crowd other vehicles.

- To avoid being blinded by the glare of oncoming headlights, focus mostly on the right edge of the road rather than staring directly at the lights.

- Dim the dashboard lights, and use high beams or fog lights when you can and when needed.

Don't forget to have regular eye exams. And make sure that if you wear glasses or contacts that your prescription is up to date. "Many eye problems such as cataracts, glaucoma, diabetic changes

New headlamps, safety features help ease worry

Automobile manufacturers have introduced a variety of safety features that can help all drivers, but are particularly helpful for older drivers with night vision problems.

All headlights are getting better, says Jeremy Stilb, a senior sales representative and product specialist at **SOMMER'S Automotive**, which sells Subaru, Buick and GMC vehicles. However, innovations like halogen lights and high-intensity discharge (HID) headlamps really light up the night.

"Sometimes they anger you when they're coming at you, but you'll be happy when you're the driver," agrees Mike Walsh, new car manager at **SOERENS Ford**. "It's a brighter, crisper light and makes everything a bit clearer."

These newer lights distribute light more evenly across the front of the car, providing a wider range of visibility. Some of the headlights even adjust as you turn to keep the light in front of your car.

"I have relatives who have to be home by 4:30 p.m.," says Darlene Loch, new vehicle sales director for **HOLZ Chevrolet**, who's familiar with concerns about night driving among older drivers. One feature that can help, she says, is a rearview mirror that automatically adjusts to dim the glare from headlights in vehicles coming from behind.

Chevrolet pays particular attention to night driving concerns by equipping all of its 2014 Impala models with projector beam headlamp technology. Some models use halogen projectors, while the LTZ uses HID bi-functional xenon projectors that offer crisper and brighter illumination.

The dealer representatives interviewed mentioned other new safety innovations that can be helpful.

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Many solutions possible

and macular degeneration can be identified and treated long before the person notices any symptoms, says Kneuppel. If you're having night vision problems, "be sure to mention that specifically," she says. "A little bit of a prescription change can make a big difference."

Investing in high quality lenses and a good anti-reflective coating on your glasses, can help with glare problems, she adds.

While many age-related vision problems are inevitable, some can be alleviated, says Kneuppel. Cataract surgery may help, and optometric therapies may help those who have depth perception problems or other issues related to injuries or a stroke.

- Talk to your doctor about the impact of any medications you're taking that might affect vision or alertness.

"Sometimes people are

afraid to talk to their doctor for fear their license might be taken away," says Peet, when a simple adjustment to medicines might help.

- Consider taking an AARP safe driver class. The classes offer older drivers a chance to improve their driving and undo any bad habits and plan ahead to stay safe on the road. www.aarp.org/home-garden/transportation/driver_safety/
- Consider having your car checked out a Car-Fit event. This program, co-sponsored by AAA, AARP and the Association for Occupational Therapy, helps older drivers make sure their car is set up so they can handle it more easily. It makes sure seats and mirrors are in correct position and suggests adaptive devices for those who have physical limitations that make it hard for them to get in or out of the car. For information: www.car-fit.org/

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Innovations ease concerns

- Lane detection systems alert drivers when they're drifting out of their lane. "It beeps to let you know you're veering over the line even if you don't see the line," explains Loch.

- Collision avoidance systems, using radar, laser and camera sensors, can detect when cars are getting too close to other vehicles or large objects in the road. Some systems even apply the brakes while alerting the driver

to these potential problems. "You're slowing down even before you know you have an issue," says Stilb.

Other features alert drivers to what's in their blind spots and offer cameras to indicate what is behind the vehicle when backing up.

--Kathleen Quirk

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