

# Process of aging can bring risks to road

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By **HOLLY YAN / The Dallas Morning News**

In Texas, some elderly motorists haven't taken a driving test since World War II. And they don't have to. According to state law, the only test that seniors – or anyone else – have to take is a vision test once every 12 years to maintain their licenses.

That worries some geriatric experts, who say slower reflexes and other ailments can impair driving ability. After a 90-year-old driver ran a red light and fatally injured a teenager last month, questions have been raised about whether license testing targeting seniors would be a precaution or discrimination.

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Katherine "Katie" Bolka, 17, was driving in the intersection of Royal Lane and Preston Road on May 30 when, police said, 90-year-old Elizabeth Grimes ran a red light and T-boned the driver's side of Ms. Bolka's car.

Ms. Bolka was hospitalized for five days before dying June 4. Ms. Grimes suffered a broken leg and fractures, Dallas police traffic Lt. John Branton said. Police said the case will be forwarded to a grand jury to determine whether charges will be sought.

Ms. Grimes' daughter told police that her mother was in good physical condition and even mowed her own lawn.

"Was her age involved? I don't know," Dallas police traffic Sgt. Andy Davis said. "This happens with 10-year drivers, 70-year drivers and people who have had their license for one day."

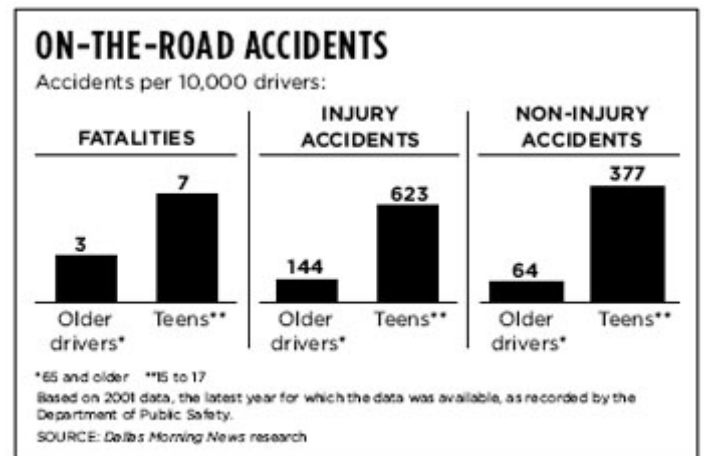
A man who answered the phone at Ms. Grimes' home on Tuesday said she was still hospitalized. A relative declined to comment.

All Texas drivers must take a vision test every other time they renew their licenses, or once every 12 years, said Tela Mange, a spokeswoman for the Texas Department of Public Safety. But no additional tests are required for drivers over a certain age.

"We've never had an age requirement for testing – that would be discriminatory," Ms. Mange said.

But some medical experts say the process of aging can naturally bring more risks to the road.

Melinda Hiemenz, an assistant clinical professor of gerontology at the University of Texas at Arlington, said elderly



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drivers can face problems other than poor vision.

"There's the slowing of the muscular-skeletal system and central nervous system, or between what the brain is seeing and relaying it to the muscles," Dr. Hiemenz said. "If they have to stop suddenly, it takes longer for the foot to brake. It's not extremely significant, but it's something they need to know."

Mentally, she said, many older drivers are sharper than some think. "As you age, your cognitive skills should stay intact, unless you have some sort of dementia or Alzheimer's," she said. "People think all older folks have dementia – that's a misconception."

What worries Dr. Hiemenz the most, she said, is vision deterioration that goes undetected.

"When we age, our peripheral vision becomes narrower," she said. "That could be a problem when a car pulls out, and they say, 'I didn't see it.'"

On the flip side, macular degeneration can prevent older drivers from seeing what would be in their central vision. This can make focusing on stoplights tricky.

Dr. Hiemenz said she would like to see driving simulation tests added to vision testing for license renewal.

"Doing it online saves time, but it keeps older adults on the road longer than maybe they should be," she said. "There are too many changes that can take place physiologically."

But AARP says singling out senior drivers is wrong.

"There isn't an easy solution to finding unsafe drivers," said Susan Williams, associate state director of AARP's Texas office. "We do not believe in age-based testing. We believe in routine testing for all drivers and ways to support people at risk. Age is not the only factor."

AARP offers a Driver Safety Program for drivers over age 50, including at Dallas locations, Ms. Williams said. It's designed to help seniors tune up their driving skills, learn how to deal with physical changes and recognize when it might be time to stop driving.

Ms. Mange declined to speculate on the logistics of testing Texas' senior drivers. There were an estimated 1.6 million Texans with driver's licenses who were 65 or older in 2001. That number is expected to rise as baby boomers reach retirement age.

But Ms. Mange said safeguards to keep dangerous motorists off the road are in place.

Family members, friends, doctors and law enforcement officers who are concerned about a person's driving ability can send a letter to the Texas Department of Health's Medical Advisory Board.

"It can be done anonymously, and it can be family members who may be reluctant to take keys away from Mom or Dad," Ms. Mange said.

The Department of Public Safety can then send a notice to a driver to visit a DPS trooper. If the driver is obviously unfit to drive, the trooper can make a recommendation to the medical advisory board to have a license revoked. Otherwise, the drivers can take a DPS driving test.

In the 2002 fiscal year, the medical advisory board looked into 9,949 cases, Ms. Mange said. Out of those, 4,423 licenses were denied or revoked.

Sgt. Davis said that in his experience, elderly drivers are not particularly dangerous.

"I don't think it's very much of a problem overall, really," he said. "In the grand scheme of things, younger drivers are much more high-speed, take greater risks and are usually more negligent."

Lt. Branton said that as of June 5, 10 of this year's 78 traffic fatalities in Dallas have involved drivers over age 60, but

it was unclear how many of those drivers were at fault. If a person is no longer able to drive safely, taking away the keys or recommending their license be taken away can be an excruciating experience for both an adult and the parent.

"It's the most difficult thing a child has to go through," said Dr. Hiemenz, who plans to visit her father soon for the conversation. "If you take away the driver's license, you have to leave them with options."

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## **WHAT DIFFERENT STATES REQUIRE**

A sampling of driving regulations around the country:

### **Florida**

Regular drivers must renew their licenses every four years, and "safe" drivers – those who do not have any tickets or suspensions – can renew every six years. Drivers under age 80 must pass a vision test on every third renewal; after age 80, drivers must pass a vision test for each renewal.

### **Illinois**

Drivers over age 75 must pass a road test to renew licenses. Also, drivers ages 81 through 86 must renew licenses every two years, and drivers 87 and older must renew licenses every year.

### **New Hampshire**

Drivers over age 75 must pass a road test to renew licenses.

### **Oregon**

Drivers over age 50 must pass a vision test.

### **Pennsylvania**

Each month, 1,650 drivers over age 45 are randomly selected six months before their license renewal date and must pass physical and visual exams by any physician. Driver selection is weighted toward older drivers.

### **Texas**

Renewal for all drivers is every six years. Drivers must pass a vision test taken on every other renewal occasion. There are no special regulations for older drivers.

### **Washington, D.C.**

Drivers over age 75 are required to pass knowledge and skills tests to renew licenses. However, in practice the tests are only given when examiners observe signs of impairment.