

# As drivers age, more challenges arise; upcoming CarFit program offers help

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CHAPEL HILL — As the injury prevention coordinator at UNC Hospital's Trauma Center, Lindsay Bailey's aim is to "keep people out of the Trauma Center by bringing safety education and programs to our surrounding communities."

Much of her work focuses on helping seniors, a growing demographic and one especially vulnerable to injury, falls being the "top mechanism of injury seen at the Trauma Center," Bailey said.

Since 2016, motor vehicle crashes have been the second most frequent cause of injury seen by the Trauma Center's staff.

In an effort to help reduce the risk of auto accidents for older drivers, Bailey and a team of trained volunteers will bring CarFit, a senior driving safety event, to Siler City's Chatham Hospital in October. The free, interactive educational program — appointments usually take about 20 minutes to complete — is designed to improve older driver safety. It's aimed at motorists age 60 and older.

"Traumatic falls can lead to loss of independence and mobility for seniors, and being able to drive safely and comfortably is just another way



AAA photo

In an effort to help reduce the risk of auto accidents for older drivers, trained volunteers will bring CarFit, a senior driving safety event, to Siler City's Chatham Hospital from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Friday, Oct. 11

to help seniors stay safe, mobile, and independent for as long as possible," said Bailey. "As we age a minor car accident or slip on the floor can be much more detrimental than it would have been at a younger age."

By 2030, Bailey said, there will be an estimated 58.9 million people age 65 and older in the United States.

"That's one in five people," said Bailey. "They're expected to represent one in four licensed drivers at that time. Personal mobility is critical for healthy aging, but as our bodies change as we age, ill-fitting vehicles can make it uncomfortable and unsafe to drive. Additionally, due to fragility, older drivers have the highest crash death rate per mile of everyone except teenagers."

CarFit is a tool "that can work to help keep seniors safer behind the wheel," Bailey said.

Participants in the program learn easy adjustments they can make to their vehicle to make driving safer and easier.

The program, for example, includes finding the right positioning between the steering wheel and the sternum, mirror adjustments to eliminate blind spots, and foot and pedal positioning for easy braking.

"Additionally," said Bailey, "the on-site occupational therapist will share with participants how to use and where to purchase adaptive devices that make driving more comfortable such as a swivel seat and leg lifter."

The CarFit program, designed by the American

Association of Retired Persons (AARP), the American Automobile Association (AAA) and the American College of Occupational Therapy, addresses a number of driving challenges unique to older drivers.

"Specific challenges can be as we age we do actually physically get shorter, which may make it more difficult to see over the dashboard," said Bailey, a CarFit event coordinator who has undergone training as a CarFit technician and additional training in order to train others to be technicians.

"CarFit addresses ways to either boost your seat up higher or use adaptive devices to ensure a safer liner of sight," she said. "As vision worsens, drivers tend to sit very close to the steering wheel,

which puts them at great risk for injury if an airbag deploys. CarFit shows drivers how to determine the safest distance from the steering wheel without making reaching the pedals difficult. As we age, neck mobility may lessen, which makes it harder to check over our shoulders for cars as we change lanes. CarFit works with seniors to make mirror adjustments to eliminate blind spots. Finally, reaching behind to grab the seatbelt can become painful and difficult as we age. There are adaptive devices available that make seatbelt use easier and more comfortable."

CarFit is not a pass/fail program and, Bailey said, "we do not make suggestions or recommendations about when an individual

should stop driving. We are purely here to educate and provide suggestions to participants about how to improve comfort and ease that leads to safer driving practices."

If someone is concerned about their own driving or a family member or friend, Bailey said, they should consult a driving rehabilitation specialist.

The upcoming event will be held at Chatham Hospital from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Friday, Oct. 11.

Bailey said past programs offered in the region have proven helpful.

"This is my fourth CarFit event that I have been a part of," she said, "and each event has proven to be a positive experience for participants and I think everyone drives away having learned how to better operate their vehicle and more confident in their abilities. I enjoy promoting these programs that can help our community's seniors stay active and achieve a high quality of life and believe it is very important work."

Bailey is currently taking appointments for the upcoming program. To schedule a free, 20-minute appointment, call her at 984-974-2437; or e-mail [Lindsay.bailey@unch-health.unc.edu](mailto:Lindsay.bailey@unch-health.unc.edu).

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