

Feds making new rules for senior drivers

Matt Schmitz, Cars.com

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The five-year plan is aimed at dealing with more older people behind the wheel



The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has announced a new five-year strategic plan to improve safety for elderly drivers and passengers.

Although they are statistically among the safest on the road, the number of older drivers is increasing dramatically — and with it, that group's numbers of injuries and deaths.

Since 2003, the population of older adults, defined as age 65 and older, has increased by 20% and the number of licensed older drivers increased by 21% to 35 million in 2012, according to NHTSA.

Last year, NHTSA reported that 5,560 people older than 65 died and 214,000 were injured in car crashes, a 3% spike in fatalities and a 16% spike in injuries compared with 2011. That's in addition to an increased risk of death or serious injury in even low-severity crashes, NHTSA stated.

In response to these figures, NHTSA's strategic plan will focus on three key areas:

Vehicle safety, particularly with regard to advanced technologies such as vehicle-to-vehicle communications, collision avoidance and crashworthiness; that's in addition to upgrades to NHTSA's New Car Assessment Program, including the new "Silver" rating system for protection of older occupants.

Data collection, for which NHTSA intends to refine its systems as it continues to examine crash rates and injuries, as well as clinical and naturalistic studies of physical, cognitive and perceptual changes associated with drivers' behavior as they age.

Driver behavior, for which NHTSA will focus efforts on public education and identifying issues pertaining to at-risk drivers' functional changes such as vision, strength, flexibility and cognition. This effort includes the all-new Older Driver Highway Safety Program Guidelines, also unveiled today in conjunction with Older Driver Safety Awareness Week, which kicked off Monday and runs through today.

"NHTSA's Older Driver Highway Safety Program Guidelines are based on best practices around the country and include countermeasures that can be implemented to ensure the safety of older drivers, including at-risk drivers," the agency said in a statement. "The guidelines encourage state highway safety offices to work closely with driver license officials, state departments of transportation, medical providers and aging services providers, among others."