

Driving after brain injury



the brain injury association

This booklet is for anyone with a brain injury in the UK, Channel Islands and Isle of Man who wishes to drive or whose driving skills have been affected by a brain injury

■ Driving after brain injury

This e-booklet is an adaptation, last reviewed in June 2018, of the Headway print booklet *Driving after brain injury*, and may contain minor updates to the original version.

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Introduction



Although we may take it for granted, driving is a very complex activity requiring a number of cognitive and physical skills, as well as the ability to co-ordinate these.

Any of these skills may be impaired after a brain injury. Fortunately, many people who have sustained a brain injury retain most of their previous driving abilities, and are able to return to driving soon afterwards. However, there are legal requirements which must be adhered to. It is sensible to take precautions such as having a driving assessment, even if you feel that your driving skills remain intact. It should be remembered that a car is a potentially lethal weapon: many people with a brain injury were themselves injured in a road traffic collision.

It can be relatively straightforward to make adaptations to a vehicle in order to compensate for physical disabilities. However, the less obvious effects of brain injury – on thinking, memory, judgement, decision making and emotions – can be more difficult to overcome.

Ultimately, the decision on whether someone is safe to drive lies with the licensing authorities. This booklet explains the processes involved in reporting a medical condition and provides advice on minimising **cognitive** and **physical** impairments.

Legal requirements

If you drive and have had a brain injury, you **must** inform the licensing authorities (see [next section](#)). This applies to any 'notifiable' condition which could affect your ability to drive and failure to inform the authorities could result in a fine of up to £1000. It would also mean that your licence is not valid and that you would be uninsured in the event of an accident.

As a general rule, the medical standards state that after a [traumatic brain injury](#) drivers with an ordinary car or motorcycle (Group 1) licence should cease driving for 6 to 12 months, depending on factors such as [post-traumatic amnesia](#), [seizures](#), and clinical recovery. Other forms of [acquired brain injury](#) have slightly different rules, but if there are lasting impairments which affect driving ability then the licence is likely to be removed for a period. However, because every brain injury is different, each case is considered on an individual basis. Further information on legal requirements is available from the [DVLA](#) (England, Scotland and Wales), the [DVA](#) (Northern Ireland) and other organisations listed in the back of this booklet (also see '[Further reading](#)').

If you are a professional driver

If you are a professional driver with a Group 2 driving licence, the required standards of health and driving ability are higher than for Group 1 licence holders. Different rules apply for Group 2 licences and it is possible that you will be able to keep your Group 1 licence, but that your Group 2 licence will be suspended or withdrawn for a period of time.

How to inform the authorities



In England, Scotland and Wales you can contact the DVLA by telephone or email and they will then send you a medical questionnaire to complete. This will include a consent form to obtain further information from your GP or hospital consultant. See '[Useful organisations](#)' for contact details.

Alternatively, you can download the [B1 online: confidential medical information form](#).

In Northern Ireland, you need to inform the [Driver and Vehicle Agency \(DVA\)](#). In Jersey, licences are issued by each [local Parish](#), so you will need to inform them of any relevant medical condition. In Guernsey, you need to contact the [Driver and Vehicle Licensing \(DVL\) department](#). On the Isle of Man you will need to inform the Department of Infrastructure at the [Vehicle Licensing Office](#). Each of these authorities follows similar or identical rules to the DVLA but you will need to follow their procedures. Contact details are in the '[Useful organisations](#)' section.

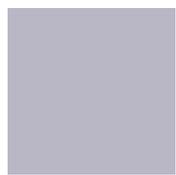
Forms for residents of Northern Ireland, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man can be obtained directly from the relevant organisations.

You must consult your doctor as to whether you should drive while your case is being assessed.

There are a number of decisions which the authority may arrive at:

- You may be allowed to keep your licence or get a new one.
- Your licence may be withdrawn or your application turned down. If so, the reason for this decision will be explained to you and you will also be told when you can re-apply for a licence – e.g. six months or a year later.
- You may be given a time-limited licence which is valid for one, two or three years, after which your fitness to continue driving will be re-assessed.
- You may be asked to take a driving assessment at a mobility centre, or to undergo an eye test or driving test before a final decision is made.
- Your licence may require you to have special controls fitted to the vehicle that you drive, to enable you to overcome any physical disability.
- Your licence may require you to only drive vehicles with automatic transmission.

Hidden aspects of brain injury

 **D**riving involves much more than simply starting, steering and stopping a car. It also requires concentration, observation, and the ability to interpret complex road situations accurately and to react calmly and swiftly.

You may feel able to carry on driving after a brain injury but it can take time to recover and to fully discover the long-term effects of the injury. You may experience a combination of **cognitive (thinking)** impairments, which make it difficult to think through a situation clearly.

A person with a brain injury may find it difficult to accept that, while they still have the technical 'know how' for driving, these other important emotional and intellectual capacities have been damaged. Alternatively, relatives may be over-anxious to protect a person with a brain injury who could still be a competent driver. An objective assessment of the person's abilities could therefore be helpful for both the driver and their family.

Problems which may affect driving skills include:

- Poor concentration. You may become distracted, confused when there is a lot going on, or easily lose the sense of what you are doing.
- Reduced reaction time, due to slower speed of information processing.
- Difficulty switching or dividing attention.
- Reduced ability to think ahead or anticipate what may happen.
- Difficulty interpreting what is seen ('reading the road'), which increases the time needed to make a decision.
- Poor memory. You may forget where you are going or how to get there, or what to do in a complex road situation.
- Poor judgement of novel situations.
- Perceptual difficulties – e.g. inability to pick out a 'stop' sign at a busy junction, or to judge speed or distance.
- Impulsive behaviour, not thinking through the consequences of actions.
- Inability to control one's temper or to cope with the frustrations of traffic delays.

Physical aspects of brain injury

Purely physical disabilities, without any accompanying cognitive (thinking) impairments, are relatively uncommon after a brain injury. **Physical problems** which may impact on driving ability include:

- Problems with movement, **balance and dizziness**
- **Weakness of limbs**
- **Fatigue**
- Loss of hearing or other senses

These effects can very often be overcome by adaptations to the car or by taking sensible precautions when driving (see section on '**If you are allowed to keep your licence**'). However, the following physical problems need to be taken into particular account and may prevent you driving.

Seizures

There is a higher than average risk of **epilepsy** after certain types of brain injury. All seizures within a 24-hour period are generally treated as a single event. This includes all events, whether partial, generalised or auras. If you have had one such isolated incident then you may be allowed to drive again after six months if your consultant thinks it is unlikely you will have another seizure. This often applies to seizures in the early stages after brain injury.

If you have seizures which don't affect your consciousness when awake, or only when you sleep, then you may still be

allowed to drive. If your fits occur while awake and affect your consciousness, then you may be allowed to drive after one year seizure free.

The [Epilepsy Action website](#) provides more detailed information on epilepsy and driving.

Problems with vision

After a brain injury, a person may have visual field neglect, which means that they cannot see anything to one side of them without moving their head. Nystagmus (fine jerky movements of the eye) and diplopia (double vision) are also fairly common. These visual defects may affect observation skills and the ability to judge speed, distance and depth, although the person may not actually be aware of these problems.

An orthoptist, ophthalmologist or a registered optician would be able to properly evaluate and assess the extent of visual problems.

- You will not be able to drive if your visual field is reduced.
- You must be able to read a number plate from a distance of 20 metres (with glasses or contact lenses if required).
- If you have distance double vision, it is a legal requirement to use an eye patch on one eye.

Driving ability assessments

If there is any doubt at all about your ability to drive safely, it is important to have an expert driving assessment, even if you feel that your driving abilities were excellent before your injury. In England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland you can get an assessment at a Mobility Centre.

Mobility Centres offer on and off-road driving assessments, advise on adaptations and may be able to provide a list of Approved Driving Instructors in your county with adapted cars or experience of working with people with disabilities.

Mobility Centres can provide an impartial assessment. The Centre will tell you:

- Whether your injury means you should drive or not.
- What car adaptations would help to overcome any physical disabilities.
- The effect that your injury has on seeing or thinking, how this might affect your driving, and how to cope.

The driving assessment also helps to reduce the anxiety that you or your family may have about your ability to drive safely. Advice might be given to help you rebuild your confidence on the road. In other cases, over-confidence may be an issue, and you may need help to be more realistic and develop a safer driving style.

There are currently 20 accredited members of [Driving Mobility](#), a network of organisations which offer information and assessments to assist people with mobility. Most areas of the UK are within 30 miles, or one hour drive, of a Mobility Centre, or one of their satellite centres.

A fee is payable for undergoing a driving ability assessment, which varies from centre to centre. The fee is usually around £80, but people in receipt of benefits may not have to pay. If the licensing authority have referred you for an assessment then they will pay the fees. Contact your chosen centre for more information.

It is worth noting that the role of the Mobility Centre is to enable safe driving, not to keep people off the road. A Mobility Centre cannot withdraw your driving licence. After the assessment, they can make recommendations to the DVLA or DVA, which are the only agencies able to withdraw a licence.

If you are allowed to keep your licence

You will no doubt feel very pleased and relieved to be told that you are fit to drive. Some general tips for safer, less stressful, driving should still be kept in mind:

- When you start driving again after your brain injury it is advisable to have another adult in the car as a passenger for the first few journeys, and to keep those first journeys short.
- Alcohol will most likely affect you more than it used to before your injury. **NEVER DRINK AND DRIVE.**
- Check with your GP about the possible side effects of any medication you are taking, particularly if this has been started recently or the dose has been altered.
- You may find that you get more tired than usual. Do not drive when you are fatigued. Plan your journey to take account of your best time of day.
- Plan your route before you set off, including places to stop for breaks on longer journeys.
- Use a satellite navigation device. This removes the need to constantly think about your route while driving.
- Be prepared to alter your plans if you do not feel well enough or alert enough to drive that day.

- Check the car for fuel and water levels and tyre tread before your journey.
- Have adequate breakdown cover, and take a mobile phone with you (with credit, and charged).
- If you receive the higher rate Mobility Component of Disability Living Allowance (DLA), or the enhanced rate Mobility Component of **Personal Independence Payment (PIP)**, you will be entitled to a 'Blue Badge' for free parking. More information on the Blue Badge scheme can be found on the [government website](#).
- Inform your insurance company of any modifications to your vehicle or any changes in your condition which could affect your policy.

Remember, if there is anything else which may affect your ability to drive, if you develop any other condition, or if an existing condition gets worse, you **MUST** inform the licensing authority.

If you are not allowed to keep your licence

 If the licensing authority does not feel it would be safe for you to drive, they will withdraw your licence. You have the right to appeal against this decision, and the relevant authority will tell you how to do this.

Being refused a licence does not necessarily mean that it will be refused forever. With time and re-learning of skills, along with possible adaptations to the vehicle, it may be possible to regain a driving licence.

Feelings about being unable to drive

Being able to drive is viewed by many as essential and as a right, so the impact of not being able to drive can have unexpected consequences. The removal of one's freedom to drive may lead to feelings of anger, frustration and resentment, as well as social isolation and difficulty finding appropriate employment.

This is in addition to the existing problems being faced in adjusting to a change in personal circumstances. People living in more rural areas may find that public transport provision is poor, taxis are expensive and family and friends may be unable to always act as chauffeurs.

It is important that family and friends are aware of this potential effect on the self-esteem of the person with a brain injury. At the same time, family members may need to be firm and support the removal of the driving licence.

One common effect of brain injury is a **loss of insight** into one's own situation. The person with a brain injury may simply be unable to accept or understand why they are no longer considered safe to drive, when they do not see any problems with their abilities or behaviour. Rehabilitation therapy and attending a support group can help people with this.

If you have not yet learned to drive

When applying for a provisional driving licence, you must inform the licensing authority that you have had a brain injury. If you receive the higher rate Mobility Component of DLA, or the enhanced rate Mobility Component of PIP, you will be able to apply for a provisional licence at 16 years of age, instead of the normal age of 17.

The following points will help when applying for a new driving licence after a brain injury:

- In England, Scotland and Wales, [apply to the DVLA](#) for a provisional driving licence. Fill in form D1 giving details of your disability or medical condition.
- In Northern Ireland you need to complete a DL1 application form, which is available in post offices, vehicle licensing offices, MOT centres or directly from the DVA.
- A DVLA or DVA medical adviser will consider your application and the medical information you have provided. They may then decide to issue a provisional licence, ask for further information, contact your doctor and/or consultant or ask you to attend a medical examination.
- In the Channel Islands and Isle of Man you will need to contact the relevant authority for information.
- The process of medical checking and handling takes time, so if you want to start driving as soon as you are legally

able, it is wise to apply for your provisional driving licence two or three months before your birthday.

- You will take the same driving test as every other candidate, regardless of your impairment or condition.
- When you book your test, let the [Driving & Vehicle Standards Agency \(DSA\)](#) in England, Scotland and Wales, or the [Driver & Vehicle Agency](#) in Northern Ireland, know about any physical disabilities you have. You may be allowed extra time for the test, in order to explain to your examiner any adaptations you use, and to allow you extra time to get in and out of the car.
- If you are aged between 16 and 29 and in receipt of the higher rate Mobility Component of DLA, or the enhanced rate Mobility Component of PIP, the [Motability Scheme](#) may be able to assist with the cost of driving lessons.
- Once you have passed your driving test, you may be entitled to receive a car through the Motability Scheme. See '[Useful Organisations](#)' for contact details of Motability.

If you or your family feel that a brain injury may have affected your ability to learn to drive, it may be useful to have a driving ability assessment. This may seem expensive initially, but could save you money in the long run by telling you whether your injury is likely to affect your ability to learn to drive, before you pay for lessons. It could also provide information which could be helpful to your driving instructor.

Financial assistance

■ If you need help to meet the costs of driving then the following may be worth contacting:

- In the UK, the [Motability Scheme](#) can help you with leasing or buying a car if you are getting the higher rate Mobility Component of DLA, enhanced rate Mobility Component of PIP, the War Pensioners' Mobility Supplement (WPMS) or the Armed Forces Independence Payment (AFIP). Even if you do not drive yourself, you can apply for a car as a passenger and propose two other people as your drivers. The scheme can help with insurance, servicing, tyres, breakdown cover and adaptations to vehicles.
- Local and national charities. Ask in the public library reference section for '*A Guide to Grants for Individuals in Need*'.
- The organisation [Turn2Us](#) can help you find grants and benefits.

- Local services such as the Round Table, Rotary, Lions Club, or church groups.
- Your insurance company, if the cause of your injury is the subject of a [compensation claim](#). Ask your solicitor for advice.
- The [Royal British Legion](#), for people who have links with the Armed Forces.
- Local Authority Social Services may be able to help.
- If you need to drive for work the [Access to Work scheme](#), via your local Jobcentre Plus, could help.
- The [Headway helpline](#) can provide details of all the above and may be able to find other sources of support.

Further reading

The following books are available from Headway and provide a good introduction to brain injury and its effects:

- Clare, L. & Wilson, B.A. (1997) *Coping with Memory Problems: A practical guide for people with memory impairments, their relatives, friends and carers*. London: Pearson Assessment.
- Daisley, A., Tams, R. and Kischka, U. (2008) *Head Injury: The Facts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hedley, N (2011) *Living with an Acquired Brain Injury: The Practical Life Skills Workbook*. Milton Keynes: Speechmark Publishing Ltd.
- Johnson, J. (2013) *My Dad Makes the Best Boats*. Milton Keynes: Speechmark Publishing Ltd.
- Johnson, J. (2013) *My Mum Makes the Best Cakes*. Milton Keynes: Speechmark Publishing Ltd.
- Johnson, J. (2011) *"My Parent has a Brain Injury..." ...a Guide for Young People*. Self-published.
- Powell, T (2013) *The Brain Injury Workbook: Exercises for Cognitive Rehabilitation*. Milton Keynes: Speechmark Publishing Ltd.
- Powell, T. (2004) *Head Injury: A Practical Guide*. Milton Keynes: Speechmark Publishing Ltd.

Headway also produces an extensive range of freely downloadable booklets and factsheets. To obtain a complete publications list or to order copies of books and booklets, please visit our [Information Library](#) or telephone **0115 924 0800**.

Useful organisations



Disability Rights UK

Tel: 0330 995 0400

Email: enquiries

@disabilityrightsuk.org

Web: www.disabilityrightsuk.org

Disabled Motoring UK

Tel: 01508 489 449

Email: info

@disabledmotoring.org

Web:

www.disabledmotoring.org

Driver & Vehicle Agency (Northern Ireland)

Tel: 0300 200 7861

Email: dva@infrastructure-ni.gov.uk

Web: www.nidirect.gov.uk/contacts/contacts-az/driver-vehicle-agency-driver-licensing

Driver & Vehicle Licensing Agency (England, Scotland and Wales)

Web: www.gov.uk/government/organisations/driver-and-vehicle-licensing-agency

Driver & Vehicle Standards (States of Jersey)

Tel: 01534 448600

Email: dvsinfo@gov.je

Web: www.gov.je/Travel/Pages/default.aspx

Driving Mobility

Tel: 01872 672 520

Email:

info@drivingmobility.org.uk

Web:

www.drivingmobility.org.uk

Epilepsy Action

Tel: 0808 800 5050

Email: epilepsy@epilepsy.org.uk

Web: www.epilepsy.org.uk

Epilepsy Society

Tel: 01494 601 400

Web:

www.epilepsysociety.org.uk/

Motability

Tel: 0300 456 4566

Web: www.motability.co.uk

RiDC

*Consumer research charity
featuring a guide for disabled
motorists*

Tel: 020 7427 2460

Email: mail@ridc.org.uk

Web: www.ridc.org.uk

**Vehicle & Driving Licensing
Office Department of
Infrastructure (Isle of Man)**

Tel: 01624 686843

Web:

www.gov.im/driving-licences

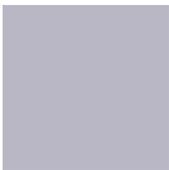
**Vehicle Registration &
Licensing Department
(Guernsey)**

Web: www.gov.gg/traffic

Parishes of Jersey Directory

Web: <https://parish.gov.je/Pages/default.aspx>

How to donate

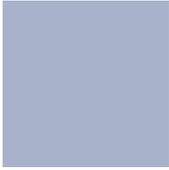


Headway – the brain injury association is a registered charity (1025852) and relies upon voluntary support to fund its work.

If you would like to help Headway by making a donation you can do so by [donating online](#), contacting the Fundraising Team on **0115 924 0800**, or sending a cheque to:

Headway - the brain injury association
Bradbury House
190 Bagnall Road
Old Basford
Nottingham NG6 8SF

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About Headway

Headway – the brain injury association is a charity set up to give help and support to people affected by brain injury.

A network of local Headway **groups and branches** throughout the UK offers a wide range of services including rehabilitation programmes, carer support, social re-integration, community outreach and respite care. The **Headway helpline** provides information, signposts to sources of support and rehabilitation services, and offers a listening ear to those experiencing problems. Other services provided by Headway include:

- Supporting and developing local **groups and branches**
- Promoting understanding of brain injury and its effects
- An award-winning range of **publications** on aspects of brain injury
- Accreditation of UK care providers through the **Approved Provider scheme**
- A comprehensive, award-winning **website**
- **Campaigning** for measures that will reduce the incidence of brain injury
- Providing grants from our **Emergency Fund** for families coping with financial difficulties
- **Headway Acute Trauma Support (HATS)** nurses to support families with loved ones in hospital

■ **Freephone helpline:** 0808 800 2244

(Monday–Friday, 9am–5pm)

■ **Telephone:** 0115 924 0800

■ **Website:** www.headway.org.uk

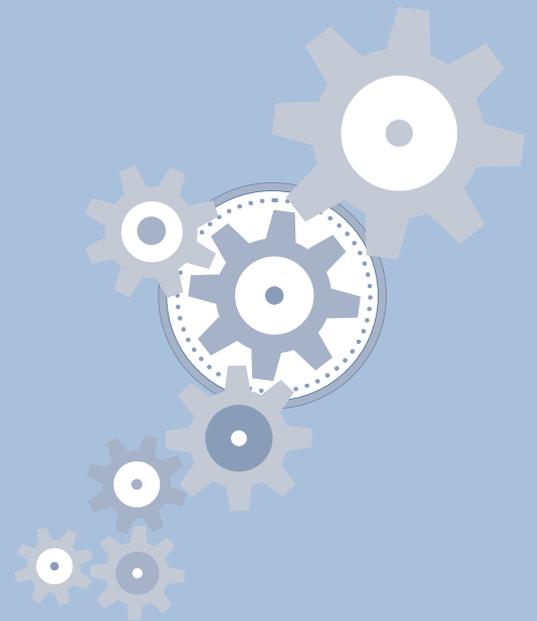
■ **Fax:** 0115 958 4446

■ **Email:** helpline@headway.org.uk



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Web: www.headway.org.uk
Helpline: 0808 800 2244