

On the road: driving when you have ataxia

There are plenty of disabled drivers on the road – but is it difficult to join them? Do you need special training or equipment, or a particular sort of licence?

Starting off

If you already have a driving licence but ataxia is now affecting your driving, you are required by law to write to the DVLA (Drivers Medical Branch) Swansea SA99 1TU; give your driving number, or your full name and date of birth, and explain the nature and extent of your disability. Don't wait until your licence is due for renewal.

If you're learning to drive, fill in the standard form for a provisional driving licence (from main post offices) and give the details about your disability. If you get the higher rate mobility component of the Disability Living Allowance, you can start to drive at 16.

In either case, you will be sent a form asking for more details of your disability, the details of any adaptations you require, and for your consent to contact your doctor or a specialist for a report to the DVLA. A medical adviser will consider this report and will either recommend issuing you with a provisional licence (if you're a new driver) or make recommendations about continuing your licence (if you already hold one). Some people are asked to attend a medical examination or a 'driving assessment' before this goes ahead.

If you already have a licence, this may be restored to run until you are 70; or you may be sent a 'restricted' licence, covering up to three years; or you may be issued with a driving licence which indicates that you need to drive a car which has had special controls fitted.

And then there are people who are refused a licence. If this happens, you will be given an explanation and you have the right to appeal to a Magistrates' Court if you live in England or Wales, or to a Sheriff Court if you live in Scotland.

Learning to drive

It's a good idea to find an instructor who has taught disabled people before. It's not likely that you'll find someone who knows a lot about ataxia (unfortunately) but an increasing number do offer specialist tuition – and this isn't just about driving alone. They can teach you techniques to get in and out of the car, to get your wheelchair in and out if you use a wheelchair, and to operate any adapted controls. You might find this useful even if you've held a licence for years already.

Look in your local area for instructors who have undertaken a special course, often at Banstead Mobility Centre or the Transport Research Laboratory.

The car itself

You don't necessarily need a specialist car – although obviously you do want one that you feel comfortable in, can get in and out of, and so on. Standard cars can be adapted using hand controls, steering wheel knobs, wheelchair hoists, ramps, tail lifts and other 'motoring accessories'.

Parking concessions

The Orange Badge Scheme has been replaced with the Blue Badge Scheme. This is a national arrangement of parking (and some other) concessions for people with severe walking difficulties (both drivers and passengers); anyone who is registered blind; and drivers with very severe upper limb disabilities who cannot turn a steering wheel by hand. Your local social services/social work department should give you more information.

As time goes on

If you have a 'restricted' licence you will need to re-apply when it runs out (although you will not have to pay). If your ataxia starts to affect your driving more, you are legally obliged to tell the DVLA too. And once you reach the age of 70, your licence will be renewed for three years or less depending on the circumstances, with the possibility of further renewals.

Further information:

www.direct.gov.uk/Audiences/DisabledPeople/Motoring

Blue Badge Network: headoffice@bluebadgenetwork.org.uk
www.bluebadgenetwork.org

Please note: The Disabled Drivers` Association has merged with the Disabled Drivers` Motor Club to form a new charity called Mobilise.

Email: enquiries@mobilise.info

(Disabled Drivers' Association: ddahq@aol.com www.dda.org.uk

Disabled Drivers' Motor Club Ltd info@ddmc.org.uk www.ddmc.org.uk)

MAVIS (Mobility Advice and Vehicle Information Service)

mavis@dft.gsi.gov.uk www.dft.gov.uk/access/mavis

Mobility Information Service mis@nmcuk.freemove.co.uk

www.mis.org.uk

Motability www.motability.co.uk

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