

Are you comfortable and in control behind the wheel?

By: *Julie Lapointe, erg., OT(C), OT Reg. (Ont.), PhD and Nicolas McCarthy, B.A.*

The Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists and the Canadian Automobile Association (CAA) have joined forces to bring CarFit to Canada. CarFit is a free program that is especially helpful for older adults going through physical changes that affect their driving. It helps you learn about various car adjustments that can improve safety and driving ability.

The CarFit program revolves around a 12-point checklist that is administered in less than 30 minutes. It also informs drivers about resources in their communities that could enhance their safety and increase their mobility. First developed in 2005 in the U.S., CarFit has also been implemented in Australia and New Zealand.

In the fall of 2012, the first Canadian CarFit public event took place in Oakville, Ontario. The event was organized by the local CAA. It took place early one Saturday morning in a mall's parking lot. Two occupational therapists who believe that CarFit is a much needed preventive program for older drivers, were among the volunteers who took on that challenge. Both of them really enjoyed the experience. They were able, for example, to offer advice to a person who was no longer able to access to the trunk of the car.

Since that first event, the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists has collaborated with the CAA on several initiatives. In May 2014, they organized the first Canadian CarFit volunteer training in Fredericton, New Brunswick. This event served about 20 older drivers. It built capacity by training professionals to offer the CarFit program in their own communities. Since that training, CarFit events have been held in Kingston and Peterborough, and more events are planned for the Fall.

CARFIT



Helping Mature Drivers Find Their Safest Fit



What gets covered during a CarFit event? Some examples:

A clear line of sight over the steering wheel: Your line of sight should be at least three inches above the top of the steering wheel.

Plenty of room between your breastbone and the air bag in the steering wheel: The distance should be at least 10 inches to allow room for the air bag to safely deploy. In an emergency, the bag quickly fills with air and expands toward your chest like a large balloon. The device deploys in less than to the blink of an eye. It only stays inflated for $\frac{3}{4}$ of a second and provides a cushion as it deflates.

A seat that fits you comfortably and safely: Each time you drive, you should be able to adjust the seat for good visibility and easy access to vehicle controls.

A properly adjusted head restraint: In the event of a crash, especially a rear-end collision, this can help prevent neck injuries like whiplash. When adjusting the head restraint, you may want to ask a friend to help you grasp the restraint and pull it up. The center of the restraint should be three inches or less from the center of the back of your head, not against your neck. If it is

too low, you could over-extend your neck and fail to properly support your head. Likewise, if the device is too high, it may not provide the proper support.

Easy access to gas and brake pedals: You should be able to easily reach the vehicle's pedals without having to stretch, and you should be able to completely depress the brake pedal. If a driver is straining to reach the pedals, it can cause leg muscle fatigue. You also should be able to move your foot easily from the gas to the brake pedal.

A seat belt that holds you in the proper position and remains comfortable as you drive: The lap belt should fit low and tight across the hips and pelvis, not on the soft tissue of the stomach. The shoulder belt should come over the collar bone, away from the neck, and cross over the breastbone, fitting snugly across the chest. The shoulder belt should never be behind the back or under the arm.

You also should be able to:

- Reach the shoulder belt and buckle and unbuckle the seat belt without difficulty
- Get into and out of your vehicle easily
- Turn your head to look over your shoulder when changing lanes and backing up. Many collisions related to lane-changing are the result of the driver's inability to check the vehicle's blind spots.
- Sit comfortably, without knee, back, hip, neck, or shoulder stiffness or pain.

Learn more:

Download CarFit's full brochure.

Find out about the upcoming CarFit events.

About the Authors:

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Nicolas McCarthy is the Communications Officer at the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists. He has held several communication positions in the private sector, government and the not-for-profit sector. Nicolas and Julie have been working steadily at developing, implementing and expanding the CarFit Program in Canada. He can be reached at: nmccarthy@caot.ca