

Driving and Hearing Loss

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The other day I almost hit an ambulance. It wasn't because I was speeding or running a red light. In fact, I was stopped at a red light, listening to an oldies station, intent on Billy Joel singing Uptown Girl. When the light switched from red to green, the vehicle in front of me failed to budge. I honked. No results. Figuring the driver was not paying attention, I swerved around and proceeded to cross the intersection. Suddenly and before me were flashing red lights. An ambulance was on the move, heading right at me. I slammed on the brakes. In the nick of time, I was able to steer free of the ambulance's path. Shaken, I turned off the radio, realizing that I had not heard the ambulance's siren.

Since that near miss, I haven't listened to music while driving. As a person suffering from hearing loss, I have realized the need to focus when behind the steering wheel. It's important to assess the landscape and regularly check mirrors, to pay attention to a car's safety features: the back up mirror, the side mirror blind spot warning system, the adaptive cruise control, and lane departure signals.

Studies have shown that hearing loss does not impede your ability to drive. No states require hearing loss testing before issuing a driver's license. No state has revoked a license based on hearing loss.

There have been incidents where drivers, who are deaf or hard of hearing, have been wrongly arrested for not following police orders when stopped for traffic violations. Some states give drivers the option of identifying themselves as a person with hearing loss or as being a deaf driver when obtaining or renewing a driver's license.

Given, those living with hearing loss would be remiss not to recognize that they need to take extra care when driving. We can help ourselves drive safely and

remain independent. It is prudent to keep your car in tiptop shape, and to make sure that all safety features are working properly. When purchasing a car, think about adding on the safety features that might aid you. Keep in mind that even without music, you still have the background noise of your car. If driving with an open window, there will be the distraction of street noise. Most likely, you will not hear approaching traffic. Those with severe or profound hearing loss may not hear emergency vehicles.

If you suffer from hearing loss, wear your aids or implants when driving. You will want all the hearing help you can get. If possible, ride with someone who has normal hearing. Don't try to carry on a phone conversation or a conversation with another passenger. If you have passengers in the car, ask them to refrain from talking. Don't focus on your phone, pad or navigation system while driving. Since you cannot rely on your hearing, you will have to make sure that your vision is in perfect shape. If you need glasses or contact lenses wear them. If it is a bright sunny day, it is probably best to wear sunglasses. Keep your windows rolled up. Those with hearing dogs might be at an advantage when motoring. Hearing dogs can be trained to alert you to sirens.

Work hard to stay independent as you motor through the hearing world. I have learned the hard way to be patient, to scan the terrain before moving out of a parking spot, or before crossing an intersection. Help yourself drive safely and ultimately you will be helping others.