

Information about Driving

For many people, using transport or being able to drive after a spinal cord injury can be a daunting thought. However, the freedom of a car is more of an essential than a luxury for most wheelchair users. So, for those who are considering it, here are the most frequently asked questions and the answers we are able to give here in the unit. You can get more in-depth information from the Scottish Driving Assessment Centre in Edinburgh or from the Motability Scheme (contact details at the bottom of this section).

When thinking about returning to driving, you must consider a number of points and the majority of people need a referral to the Scottish Driving Assessment Centre in Edinburgh. They will assess your ability to control a car. This is not a driving test.

Do I have to let DVLA know about my injury?

Driving License

Yes, if you have had a spinal cord injury you are required by law to tell the Driving and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA).

You can do this by writing a letter. They will usually respond in writing to you and may send you out further medical forms for you to fill in to gain a clearer picture of your injury. You must complete a Confidential Medical Information Questionnaire (form G1) which will tell the DVLA of any details relating to your injury. As part of the G1 form there is an additional form D497 which is a Declaration of Special Controls Required.

This section has a number of tick boxes that list types of controls that you might need to allow you to drive. On some occasions they may contact your consultant or GP for further information. In some instances DVLA may request you send your license to them to allow it to be amended. If you know you are going for a driving assessment it is useful to mention this in your initial letter, as you need your licence with you at your assessment.

More information about driving with a disability is available on the Directgov website: www.direct.gov.uk

As a paraplegic do I need to go for a driving assessment?

If your injury has left you with complete paraplegia, with no other injuries, you do not need a formal assessment. As you are unable to operate the pedals of a manual drive car you will need to drive an adapted car, normally an automatic with hand controls. There are numerous different styles of hand controls available depending on your balance and dexterity.

The most common style of hand controls is a push and pull accelerator but even then there are many configurations.

If you are entitled to a car through the Motability Scheme you can have input as to what style of hand controls you can have fitted, within reasonable cost of course.

Steering aids (steering balls or grips) also come in various designs and it is a matter of finding out which one is most suitable for you.

Converting your vehicle from manual to hand controls normally costs about £500 though prices do vary and there are a number of different types available.

There is now a scheme with motability that can assist with costs. More information is available on the website www.motability.co.uk/cars-and-wavs/adaptations-and-adjustments/adaptations-prices

A referral to the Scottish Driving Assessment Centre may be helpful to try the different controls available. It may also be helpful to have a driving lesson with a qualified instructor (BSM have adapted vehicles available for lessons) to give you the opportunity to practice the controls and improve your confidence. Neither of these are essential or legal requirements, but we would recommend them. Spinal Injuries Scotland has a list of hand control suppliers that they can either email or send out by post if required.

Is using hand controls difficult?

Driving using hand controls can be worrying at first but most people adapt to it fairly quickly.

For some people balance is the one thing that they find slightly more difficult to adapt to but this varies between individuals and their level of injury.

Steering aids on the steering wheel can help especially when turning corners but again the more you do it the more you get used to it. Positioning of the steering aid can also make a difference so make sure if you are having a steering aid fitted it is in a position that suits you.

Some people prefer to have the steering aid located at approximately between the ten and eleven o'clock position and others prefer it between seven and eight o'clock.

This is a personal preference but can make a huge difference to confidence when driving.

As a Tetraplegic will I be able to return to driving?

This is dependent on the level and severity of the injury. As you have paralysis of your lower limbs and partial paralysis of your upper limbs you will need to go for a driving assessment. The purpose of the assessment is to establish if you have the ability to control the car and to identify the adaptations that are required to help this, not your driving ability. Your consultant and occupational therapist will make the referral whilst you are in hospital. If you are discharged your consultant can still make the referral or you can ask your GP to make one.

I can't transfer from my wheelchair to a car seat. Does this mean I cannot drive?

If you are unable to transfer in and out of a car independently, there may be equipment available that will assist you. This can be assessed at the Driving Assessment Centre. If you cannot transfer you will need to consider a vehicle that can be

converted to allow you to drive from your wheelchair. These vehicles can be expensive. Although grants are available through the Motability Scheme, there are limitations and specific criteria to consider. These details are available on the Motability website. www.motability.co.uk

What happens during the assessment?

The initial part of the assessment is an interview. This is to get basic details about you and to gain further information about your injury and your current health. It involves a basic eyesight test and physical assessment. The test will then establish if you have any cognitive problems.

The next part involves transferring into something called a 'Static Rig'. This is basically the dashboard and driving controls of an Alfa Romeo car. The rig can be converted to accommodate numerous steering controls with adjustments made to the power steering. The rig assesses reaction times and average strength used in steering and braking.

If you have been successful in achieving average times during your assessment and the first part of the assessment went well, you may then progress into an adapted vehicle to allow the assessor to confirm your abilities. It also gives you a chance to 'have a go' at driving. The drive starts off around the grounds where the assessment is taking place, followed by a short trip on nearby roads.

When you complete the assessment you will be advised at the time, and in writing on the adaptations that you need to allow you to safely drive, and possibly the type of car that you may need. If the test hasn't gone as well as you hoped there is always the opportunity to go for a further assessment in the future. It isn't a matter of one test, one chance.

My injury is incomplete, do I have to go for an assessment?

Probably. If you have an incomplete tetraplegia then we recommend a driving assessment. This is because you have weakness in all 4 limbs and again it is to make sure you can safely control the car. The recommendation may simply be an automatic vehicle with ultra light steering. If you have an incomplete paraplegia, the need for an assessment depends on the level of weakness and any sensory deficit in your lower limbs.

During my injury I acquired a head injury, how soon can I return to driving?

This depends very much on the severity of the head injury you have had and if you had any surgery to treat it. If you are experiencing black outs, memory problems, seizures, visual disturbances etc then it may be too soon to have a driving assessment. Depending on the severity of your head injury and surgery you may have to wait 12 months to get a driving assessment. It's best to get advice from your consultant or occupational therapist about this.

I didn't drive before my injury, how do I get my license?

You must have a provisional licence before you can have an assessment. (If you don't hold one you will need to get one).

If it is likely that you will need an adapted vehicle to have lessons, you may also need an assessment to establish the type of adaptations required. Many of the larger driving schools have automatic vehicles converted with hand controls which you can access for lessons. Otherwise, you may have to provide your own dual control, adapted vehicle. You may have to fund these adaptations or there are grants that you can apply for through the Motability scheme.

I'm 16 years old, do I have to wait until I am 17 to apply for my provisional license and have driving lessons?

No, you may apply at 16 years old. You may also be eligible for a grant to assist with the cost of the lessons and conversion of your vehicle.

I don't live in Edinburgh, can I still have a Driving Assessment?

Yes. The Scottish Driving Assessment Centre is based at The Astley Ainslie Hospital in Edinburgh. As the Centre covers the whole of Scotland it does have a waiting list, so you may wait a number of weeks for your appointment.

Driving Assessment Centre

Returning to driving for many is easier than you think. The Centre is there to encourage disabled drivers back behind the wheel, hopefully increasing their independence and quality of life. If for whatever reason driving is no longer an option for you the Centre can provide advice and guidance about adaptations, transfer options, adapted vehicles and a whole variety of other information including grants for adaptations and driving lessons.

I do not drive and cannot transfer out of my wheelchair.

What are the options for transport for me?

- Public transport – buses and trains
- Taxi – hackney taxis have ramps
- Dial-a-ride
- Wheelchair adapted vehicle etc

Other useful points to note

If you lease a car through the Motability Scheme you automatically get breakdown cover from one of the major breakdown organisations.

If you don't have a Motability car, tell your breakdown company about your disability. They will add this to the information they already keep for you. This does not mean that you will be first to be attended to in the event of a breakdown but they will try and prioritise dealing with you.

Insurance

There should be no difference to insurance for cars fitted with hand controls. Hand controls are not seen as an adaptation to the car but it is good practice to let your insurance company know that you are driving with hand controls.

If you lease a car through the Motability scheme, you will not accrue any 'No claims discount' as you would do on other regular insurance policies. This would affect the cost of your insurance if you choose to leave the Motability scheme and buy a car privately. Royal and Sun Alliance, the insurance company for Motability should be able to provide details of your insurance claims, if any, to an insurance company but they may charge you for this service.

Scottish Driving Assessment Centre

The Centre provides practical and independent advice and assessment to disabled drivers and passengers.

Marlene MacKenzie

Service Manager

Scottish Driving Assessment Centre

Astley Ainslie Hospital

133 Grange Loan

Edinburgh EH9 2HL

marlene.mckenzie@nhslothian.scot.nhs.uk

0131 537 9100 or 9192

Motability

If you receive either the Higher Rate Mobility Component of Disability Living Allowance (HRMC DLA), the Enhanced Rate of the Mobility Component of Personal Independence Payment (ERMC PIP), the War Pensioners' Mobility Supplement (WPMS) or the Armed Forces Independence Payment (AFIP) you may be eligible to join the Motability Scheme.

Check out their website for more information.

www.motability.co.uk

0845 456 4566

DVLA

Drivers Customer Services

Correspondence Team

DVLA

Swansea

SA6 7JL

Driver Licensing Enquiries

Telephone: 0300 790 6801

Fax: 0300 123 0784

Or

Drivers Medical Enquiries

DVLA

Swansea

SA99 1TU

Driving and medical issues

Drivers Medical Enquiries

Telephone: 0300 790 6806

Fax: 0845 850 0095