

Learning How to Drive with OI

Like driving itself, learning to drive is a dynamic process. For young people who have OI, learning to drive will involve access to an appropriate vehicle that accommodates for their type of OI, height, hand and arm strength, arm and leg length, wheelchair use and ability to transfer to the driver's seat. Those with the mildest form of OI may not need anything special in terms of training or vehicle adaptations.

The process of becoming a licensed driver is governed by a series of state laws. Each state handles this a little bit differently. Everyone is expected to know the rules of road and pass the same written and road tests.

Drivers with physical disabilities may need to be evaluated regarding the need for adaptive equipment such as hand controls or pedal extensions and also their ability to use that equipment. Prospective young drivers and their families should know that these steps take time. In some states it can take up to a year to get evaluated and then to get a spot in a training class.

Here are a few suggestions to help you locate the information that applies to student drivers in your community.

1. **Check with your insurance company** to see if they have any requirements and/or if they offer discounts to those who have successfully completed a special driver education program (similar to "good student" discounts).
2. **Check insurance rates with your agent.** Rates may differ depending on the student's age and degree of disability.
3. **Check with your state's department of motor vehicles** either in person or on their web site. Most states have a series of brochures for drivers with a physical disability. This is also a good place to get the latest information on car air bags to help you determine if an on/off switch is appropriate for you or the driver in your family who has OI.
4. **If your community offers driver education through the high schools**, you can consult with the staff or guidance counselor for referrals to special driver education facilities.
5. Some states require all prospective drivers who have a chronic medical condition to have an **evaluation by a Certified Driver Rehabilitation Specialist**. Other states require a **letter of medical approval** from your doctor. Some doctors will ask you to see an evaluator before they will sign the medical approval letter. In some states this applies to everyone with chronic health issues including people with mild OI while in others the rule applies only to those with more severe OI. The specialist will determine whether any special equipment (smaller steering wheel, pedal extenders, hand controls etc.) is necessary and whether the student has enough strength to handle a conventional vehicle. The specialist will also make recommendations regarding vehicle styles.
6. Some states manage their driver education programs for people with physical disabilities through their **state department of vocational rehabilitation**. Some state offices of vocational rehabilitation have special programs if the prospective driver needs to learn to drive to attend college or vocational school and/or be employable.
7. To locate a certified driver rehabilitation specialist in your state, you can go to the web site for the **Association for Driver Rehabilitation Specialists**, www.aded.net. Click on "Membership Directory" on the left navigation bar and then enter your state. The **American Occupational Therapy Association** web site also has a data base of trained driver evaluators under their Information for Consumers section.
8. Depending on the results of the evaluation, the student will be referred to a regular **driving school** or to a special program. Special programs not only teach the student how to drive but also how to use the adaptive equipment. Students needing hand controls will almost always be referred to a special driving program. In most cases the driving school will provide a vehicle for their lessons.

9. Some families choose private instruction and hire a certified instructor to give driving lessons in the vehicle that the driver with OI will be using.

An important factor to consider is what vehicle the student will drive. Each of the major car manufacturers have rebate programs to help cover the cost of adapting a new vehicle for a driver with a disability. These often focus on adding ramps or hand controls. Many of these adaptations are quite expensive and in most cases these rebates are quite small. Information is available on line or from your dealer. While it is common to think about full size vans as the vehicle of choice for wheelchair users, many other car styles can be adapted.

Air bags are a concern for many drivers. OI is not on the list of disabilities that automatically qualifies for having the air bag turned off. Car safety experts suggest that if the driver can sit 10 inches from the airbag that it is safer to keep the airbag activated. This distance is measured from the steering wheel to the breastbone of the driver. To have the on-off switch installed you must submit a form to your state motor vehicle office.

All of this information gets you to the most important step in the learning to drive process – the opportunity to practice, practice, and practice some more.

This article is based on

a presentation at the 2006 National Conference on OI by Jenny Spegel,
Driver Evaluator, Immanuel Rehabilitation Center in Omaha. Ken, Ann and Jessica Finkel
provided additional information based on their experience.

Reprinted from the Winter 2007 issue of the OI Foundation newsletter **Breakthrough**.

Reviewed December 2016