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She was absolutely beautiful, white with a little rust on the fenders, crank windows, four doors, no air conditioning, and wide as a river barge. I was 16, it was 1974, she was a 10 year old 1964 Chevy Impala and she was all mine... sort of. You see, I happened to be the only teenage driver in the house when this “new” old car was handed down to us from Grandma Bertha when she was forced to relinquish her driver’s license because she failed her vision test.

You see, the motor vehicle department, in its infinite wisdom, recognized my need for wheels and strictly enforced their arcane and arbitrary vision requirements, forcing Grandma to relinquish her driving privileges, dropping that oil burning gas guzzler in my lap. But was Grandma really a danger to society because she could not read the FZBDE line on the eye chart from 20 feet away? She did not think so but, lucky for me, she had no recourse. That was then and this is now, but has anything really changed?

The Department of Motor Vehicles requires an applicant to have best corrected 20/40 vision in at least one eye to qualify for an unrestricted, non-commercial Class D driver’s license (20/40 means that you can see at 20 feet what the average person can see at 40 feet). They also require peripheral vision of at least 105 degrees with both eyes together. Commercial license requirements are more stringent, requiring good vision in both eyes. Sounds very formal, official, and science-based, doesn’t it? Wow, 20/50 vision is so much worse than 20/40 that you become a menace on the road, poised to drive that two-ton Buick through Nelson’s store front, casually put it in PARK and reach for the peanut butter. Or is it?

As it turns out, many of the vision requirements for driving are arbitrary values assigned in the 1920’s because road signs were a certain size. Surprisingly, however, researchers have been unable to find a strong association between moderate visual loss and the risk of motor vehicle accidents. In fact, a 2002 analysis of federal statistics show limited or no differences in crash risk between drivers with 20/40 vision and those with 20/70. Obviously, vision is crucial but it is only one of many components required for safe driving.

Actually, the American Academy of Ophthalmology’s “Vision Requirements for Driving” policy statement lists five skills needed for safe operation of a motor vehicle.

1. The motor ability to scan a rapidly changing environment
2. The sensory ability to perceive information in this rapidly changing environment
3. The attentiveness to process multiple pieces of information
4. The cognitive ability to make judgments based on this information
5. The motor ability to execute these decisions in a timely fashion

The Minnesota Department of Public Safety has and enforces its vision requirements, as noted above, but also takes some of this recent research into account. Clearly vision is only a part of the total driving package so it is reasonable to make accommodations for those with mild visual impairment but who have the other skills required to drive. People with vision reduced to as low as 20/70 can qualify for a license with restrictions including speed and area limitations, daylight only, and no freeway driving. Beyond that, exceptions may be made only with a driving test. If vision is 20/100 or worse, a license is denied without exception.

Overall, these regulations are fair and reasonable, allowing a minimum of hassle for most people, fair opportunity for those with some visual issues, and recourse for many with borderline vision. The motor vehicle department recognizes our individual and societal dependence on the automobile and will work with most to maintain their independence while still keeping the roads as safe as possible.

If you encounter problems, feel your vision is not as good as it should be, have trouble with road signs or glare, or fail the screening test, have a full eye exam. Although vision is not the only factor involved in safe driving, it is usually a good place to start. New glasses can often solve the problem, but cataract surgery may be in order, as well. Once the vision is maximized, then you, your family and your family doctor can determine how well you meet the five criteria needed for safe driving.