

Return to Driving After Stroke

Information from the Stroke Network of Southeastern Ontario

Driving After a Stroke

For many people, being able to drive is an important part of maintaining independence and staying connected to their community. Your ability to drive depends on good vision, quick thinking skills, and the ability to physically operate a vehicle. A stroke can cause changes in the brain that may affect one or more of these skills, making it unsafe to drive. Everyone recovers at a different rate with differing abilities following a stroke. About 30-40% of stroke survivors will return to driving.

Why Can't I Return to Driving Right Away?

Your risk of stroke is highest in the first month following your stroke. After a brain injury such as a stroke, you may have difficulties with thinking, vision, processing information, or moving your body. This may make it dangerous to drive a vehicle. You may also have a medical condition that could put you at risk of losing consciousness at the wheel. Your medications and medical conditions need to be stable before your doctor or Nurse Practitioner (NP) say it is safe to return to driving.

Licence Reporting/Duty to Report

In Ontario your health care team **may** report to the Ministry of Transportation (MTO) that you have had a stroke. Doctors/NPs & Optometrists must report an individual who has a condition that may affect their ability to drive safely (for example, a stroke, heart condition or dizziness, and others). Occupational Therapists also have discretionary authority to report conditions that will make it dangerous for a person to drive. This is for your safety and the safety of others. In this case, the MTO will send you a letter in the mail letting you know the next steps. It may take up to 6 weeks to get your letter. If your licence is suspended, you are not able to return to driving until the conditions set out by the letter are met. If you choose to drive without medical clearance or a suspended licence, your insurance may not protect you after an accident or traffic stop. If you do not follow the proper process it could result in a permanent loss of your licence. **It is illegal to drive with a suspended licence.**

My Return to Driving After Stroke Checklist

- I am not to drive for **at least 30 days** after my stroke. This includes all motorized vehicles such as cars, trucks, tractors, and heavy machinery or equipment etc.

AND

- My doctor/NP must tell me that I can return to driving (this may involve additional testing, re-training and/or completing an on-road assessment);

AND

- My licence must be valid or reinstated by the MTO before I can drive again.

Stroke Effects

That Can Impact Driving

PHYSICAL



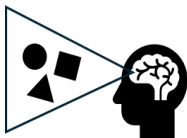
- Weakness and fatigue
- Poor coordination and/or limited movement in trunk, arms, legs, and neck
- Altered sensation: difficulty feeling (e.g. steering wheel or gas pedal)
- Decreased proprioception (inability to know where arms and/or legs are when not looking at them)

COGNITIVE



- Trouble maintaining focus and/or difficulty dividing attention
- Slower processing speed and reaction time
- Impulsive behavior (acting quickly without thinking first)
- Changes in judgement, decision making, concentration
- Decreased memory

PERCEPTION



- Poor spatial awareness and depth perception
- Visual neglect or inattention (a 'blind side' that the brain forgets is there)
- Motor planning problems or apraxia (uncontrolled movements of your body in unexpected or unpredictable ways)

VISION



- Blurry or double vision
- Changes in field of vision (what the eyes see without moving the head)
- Difficulty activating the muscles that move the eye

SPEECH & LANGUAGE



- Challenges with communication, including asking for help or directions
- Difficulty with following directions, reading and interpreting signs in a timely manner

MEDICAL



- Typically must be seizure free for at least 1 year
- Must be medically stable and not at risk of becoming unconscious at the wheel
- Certain medications may impact safety with driving
- Hearing loss

When should I be tested for driving? There is no specific recommendation for timing of testing, as stroke affects each person differently. Practice patience if driving is your goal, give yourself time to recover from your stroke before prioritizing driving. Your therapy team will play a role in determining your readiness to return to driving and will let your doctor or NP know how your recovery is progressing. You may benefit from more time to recover. Some people will require an on road test at an approved "Functional Assessment Centre". See page 5 for more details.

Working Together

Roles and Responsibilities

Stroke Survivor (You)

- Recover from your stroke. Participate in therapy and work towards your goals
- Do not drive until:
 - * It has been at least 30 days AND;
 - * You have been cleared to drive by your doctor/NP AND;
 - * Your licence is valid or has been reinstated by the MTO
- Ask if you have questions:
 - * Your medical/therapy team
 - * Ministry of Transportation
Online: www.dlc.rus.mto.gov.on.ca
Phone: 1-800-268-1481

Family and Care Partners

- Provide support, reminders and guidance to you the stroke survivor
- Assist (as able) to create an alternative transportation plan as needed (see pg. 6 for more details)
- Ask questions/ discuss concerns if they arise with the medical/therapy team
- Help you advocate for what you need or want

Ministry of Transportation

- Review doctor/NP/OT report(s) and decide whether or not to suspend your driver's licence
- Notify you (in writing) of the decision about your driver's licence and next steps to take

Therapy Team

Occupational Therapist (OT), Physiotherapist (PT), Social Worker (SW), Speech Language Pathologist (SLP)

- Conducts screening tests and helps decide if/ when the stroke survivor is ready for an in-car/ on-road assessment
- Helps with accessing alternative transportation and creating a plan to assist with community mobility/access
- Works with you the stroke survivor to improve any stroke-related deficits (physical, cognitive, perceptual etc.) that impact driving ability.
- Shares assessment results with the medical team (doctor/NP)
- May send information to the MTO

Functional Assessment Centre

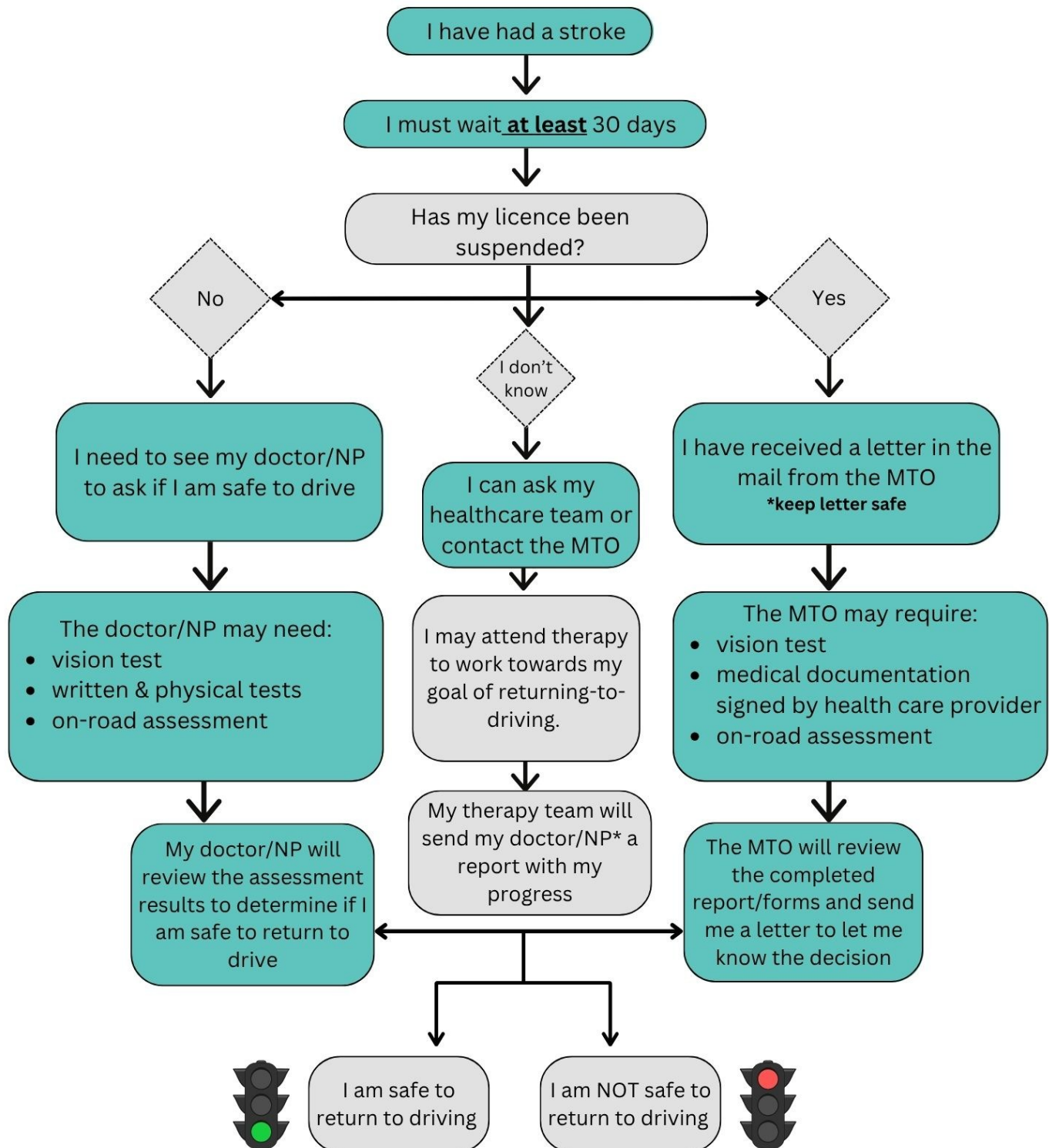
- Assist with obtaining a temporary licence if needed for on-road test
- Complete functional (on-road) assessment and report finding to Ministry of Transportation
- Make recommendations for adaptive vehicle modifications if necessary
- Offer in-car training when indicated

Medical Team (doctor/NP)

- Assess your readiness to return to driving based on test results and evaluation from your therapy team
- Sends reports to the MTO (e.g. complete and review forms from MTO)

My Road to Recovery

A Step-by-Step Guide



On-Road Assessments

Functional Driving Assessment Centres

What is a Functional Driving Assessment?

Sometimes an on-road driving assessment is required by the MTO and/or your doctor/NP before you can return to driving. This is different from the driving tests at Service Ontario, driving schools or testing completed during rehabilitation. This comprehensive evaluation happens at **approved** locations called “Functional Assessment Centres” (FAC). These assessments include both in-office and on-road testing, totaling approximately 3-4 hours of time. It is conducted by an Occupational Therapist with advanced training/certification in driving rehabilitation and a specialized driving instructor.

Where does the referral come from?

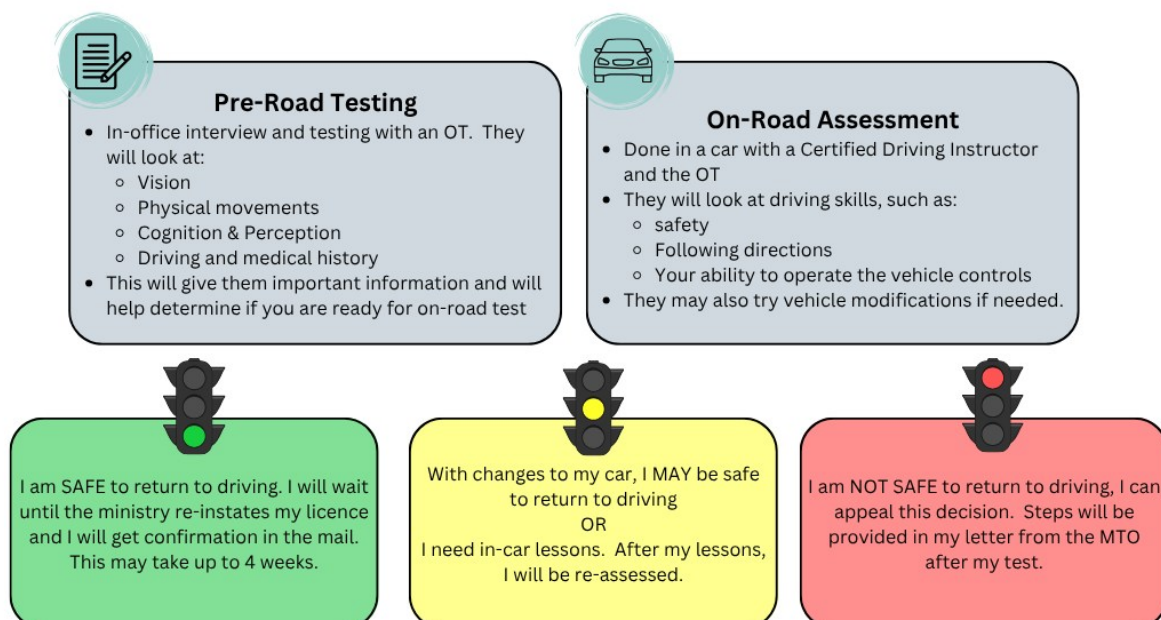
Many members of your healthcare team can make a referral. Your doctor/NP, the MTO or your Occupational Therapist (OT) can send a referral on your behalf. Some centres require a referral from a doctor/NP. Some centres allow you to self-refer. This varies by location.

How much does it cost?

Services offered and associated costs vary by location. You are encouraged to request a price list from centres directly. This assessment is NOT covered by Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP) or the MTO and it will cost you between \$800-\$1,000. There may be additional costs associated with adaptive driving equipment, in-car training, or additional testing etc. This is why it is important to wait until you are ready to return to driving before initiating this process.

Where can I find a Functional Assessment Centre nearby?

The MTO website <https://www.ontario.ca/page/medical-review-ontario-drivers> is the best up to date resource for finding a FAC. Alternatively, your healthcare team can provide you with a list of centres in your area. Not all FAC offer the same services; evaluation for adaptive driving equipment and vision waivers are only available at select centres.



Retiring from Driving

Staying Independent & Mobile

What if I can't return to driving?

Sometimes, there are lasting effects from your stroke that make driving unsafe. When this happens, returning to driving may not be possible. Having a stroke can have significant impact on your mental health and mood which can also be heightened by the potential loss of the ability to continue driving. Your new functional status may change how you care for yourself and interact with others. It is normal to have feelings of anger or sadness. It can take time to process this. The loss of driving privilege can be difficult.

Connecting with therapy resources (i.e. counselling) within your community may be helpful when learning how to cope with this change and reframe your new way of living. Ask to speak with a social worker with the help of your primary care provider and/or therapy team. Being around others who have experienced the life changing effects of stroke can help! Get connected to peer programs with your local **Community Stroke Support Services Agency**. Visit www.strokenetworkseo.ca to find the program in your area.

Making a Transportation Plan

A transportation plan is one way to manage your community mobility needs. You can do this on your own, or with [help from your healthcare team](#).

1. Start with writing down a list of places that you go regularly. Note how often you need to go to these places and how long you spend there.
2. Gather a list of alternative options for to transportation in the community. Connect with your Community Stroke Support Services Agency about whether or not you have access to a transportation program. Consider delivery options (for groceries/medications), meal service providers, ride share options, and taxies, as well as friends/family. Consider accessible transportation options if needed.
3. Match each place you need to get to, with a suitable alternative transportation option.
4. Be sure to also consider any cost/fees and timelines for booking drives.
5. Remember to review and update your plan regularly as your needs may change.

South East Health Line www.southeasthealthline.ca

Healthline is an online resource that helps people find programs in their communities, to meet their needs. These programs include transportation support but also assistance with grocery shopping, meal delivery services, medication delivery services, etc.

This resource was adapted with permission from the Southwestern Ontario Stroke Network (SWOSN)'s 2024 "Driving After Stroke" resource in alignment with the Canadian Stroke Best Practice Recommendations. Original source Hamilton Health Sciences, Hamilton ON Canada. **Inquires can be made to natalie.aitken@kingstonsoc.ca**. The Stroke Network of Southeastern Ontario thanks the Southeast Occupational Therapists and patient advisors who contributed to adapting this resource.