Older drivers more vulnerable when making left turns

A Sun Sentinel analysis shows they're more likely to be involved in serious crashes when turning left

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Left turns are considered risky for any driver. But for older drivers and their passengers, they can be particularly deadly.

A crash Sunday night west of Boynton Beach killed one man and left four others hospitalized after an older driver attempted a left turn and was struck by another car.

Traffic-safety officials, aware that older drivers have trouble negotiating left turns on South Florida's busy streets and roads, tell older drivers to avoid left turns as much as possible.

"Do what UPS drivers are taught to do — make a right, make a right, make a right turn," said Fran Carlin Rogers, an Orlando-based senior transportation consultant. "Older drivers are absolutely vulnerable when making left turns."

A Sun Sentinel analysis of Florida crash data from 2010, the most recent year available, shows that:

•21 percent of drivers 70 and older were making left turns when they were involved in serious crashes. For drivers younger than 70, the rate was 13 percent.

•Drivers age 70 and older also were more likely to be injured in left-turn crashes than younger drivers. The two groups had similar injury rates for crashes in general, but 36 percent of older drivers in left-turn crashes were injured, while 26 percent of younger drivers were injured.

•There were 382 serious crashes involving drivers 70 and older making left turns in Broward County, 207 in Palm Beach County and 559 in Miami-Dade County.

"Any left turn is a more complex maneuver," said Kathleen Valentine, director of the Louis and Ann Green Memory and Wellness Center at Florida Atlantic University. "Add any kind of visual or physical or cognitive impairment to that, and it just accentuates that."

Killed in Sunday night's crash was Steven Taitel, 69, of Lake Worth. Among the four hospitalized was the driver making the left turn.
According to the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office, Edith Bette Lewis, 72, pulled into the path of another car as she was turning left into Cobblestone Creek subdivision. Lewis was seriously injured.

Taitel and his wife, who was in critical condition, were passengers in the other car. The driver, Jack Weinstein, 73, and his wife, Joyce Weinstein, also were injured.

There have been other recent deaths.

Evelyn Gartman, 82, died in December as she and her husband were making a left turn onto Military Trail west of Boynton Beach when a teenage driver ran a red light and plowed into their car.

A 70-year-old Dania Beach man killed a motorcyclist in December while making a left turn from Federal Highway onto Southeast Sixth Street in Dania Beach.

In those instances, the older driver may not have been at fault. But older drivers are less able to judge how far away or how fast a vehicle is coming toward them before they begin a left turn, Carlin said.

Because of that, she advocates for more left-turn lanes with dedicated traffic signals.

According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, the most common error made in crashes involving older drivers is failure to yield the right of way.

In the Sun Sentinel's analysis of 2010 crashes, "failed to yield right of way" was listed as a contributing cause in 64 percent of left-turn crashes involving older drivers.

Judi Hamelburg, a South Florida physical therapist and certified driver rehabilitation specialist, said a number of factors make left turns hazardous for older drivers.

Their vision and depth perception may be diminished. Their reaction time may be slower. And their judgment may be off.

"Because they're not seeing clearly, they wait until they can see a car really good and then jump in front of it," she said.

Physically, it may take older drivers longer to move their feet from the brake to the gas, losing precious time to take advantage of the gaps in traffic and getting across the road, Hamelburg said.

That's why in driver safety courses for older drivers, an emphasis is placed on left turns.

"If a car is coming toward you, you can't tell how fast it's coming," said Joy Riddell, a Pompano Beach driving safety instructor for AARP. "The older we get, the less we don't know. It's so much harder. I stress this because so many people are getting broadsided and they're seniors."
She recalled the 2010 death of Lorelei Pelaia, the longtime chairwoman of the Pink Lady Thrift Shop at Holy Cross Hospital in Fort Lauderdale. Driving her Camry, Pelaia, 91, was turning left into the Holy Cross entrance when she was hit by a BMW.

In her classes, Riddell, 73, tells her students about the "Betty Turn." That's when you make consecutive right turns to get to your destination to avoid make a left turn.

She named it after her mother, who lived in Leisureville in Pompano Beach. Her mother told her about a number of older drivers getting hurt in crashes involving left turns. So her mother decided to stop making left turns.

"She said, 'I'm retired. I have all the time in the world,'" Riddell said.

Riddell does make left turns, but she follows the advice she gives to her students.

"Give yourself plenty of time," she said. "Let all the cars go by. Say to yourself, 'I can't judge the speed of that car.'"