

Ready for the road

A CarFit class helps drivers 50 and over get situated better — and more safely — behind the wheel.

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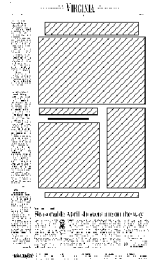
With just a seat tweak here and a steering wheel nudge there, June Ditillo was ready to go.

Volunteers diagnosed the 76-year-old Roanoke County resident's seating inside her 2008 Saturn at a CarFit session Tuesday.

Though her fit was near-perfect before the assessment in Our Lady of Nazareth Catholic Church's parking lot, Ditillo wanted to be safe, she said.

Twenty-five drivers attended the CarFit session, a free clinic that helped drivers 50 and older make sure they're comfortable, have few blind spots and know how to work the gadgets behind the wheel.

"If you're not comfortable, then you're distracted when you're driving," said Nancy Lo, coordinator of Virginia Grand-Driver, a program of the state's Department for the Aging. Senior drivers have the highest rate of fatalities per mile they drive, according to the Department of Motor Vehicles.



Drivers can make small adjustments for safety

- When the right foot is on the gas pedal, the steering wheel should be 2 or 3 inches above the driver's knee.
- The driver's eye level should be 3 or more inches above the top of the steering wheel.
- Drivers should sit at least 10 inches away from the steering wheel.
- If holding the end of a ruler against a steering wheel's center, the ruler should aim at the driver's chest. This is the direction an air bag will deploy. Air bags — exploding with the help of gunpowder at a speed of 200 mph during a front-end collision — could injure the driver's face if the wheel is tilted too far upward.
- The bottom strap of a seat belt should rest across a driver or passenger's hips. In a collision, a belt sitting further up on the stomach could cause internal injuries.
- The top strap of the seat belt should rest between a person's shoulder and collarbone.
- The rearview mirror should be adjusted to reflect the car's entire back window.
- If a car has significant blind spots, the driver may want to adjust side view mirrors to flare out for more visibility. But make the change gradually — it could drastically affect parking and other maneuvers.
- For the left mirror, lean a little toward the driver's window. For the right mirror, lean a little toward the center of the car. Tilt the side view mirrors out until you see only a sliver of your car.
- For people who have difficulty getting into a car, accessories like a key holder, leg lifter, seat belt grip and seat pads are available at medical supply stores.

GrandDriver and Carilion Clinic sponsored CarFit, and American Occupational Therapy Association, AAA and AARP and also supported Tuesday's program.

Christine Mangone, an occupational therapist at Carilion Clinic, will schedule another CarFit session in the next few months and may offer free private sessions. Call Carilion at 266-6000 to sign up.

"If you're not comfortable, then you're distracted when you're driving."

Nancy Lo | coordinator of Virginia GrandDriver



JARED SOARES | The Roanoke Times

Jefferson College of Health Sciences students Erin Partsch (left) and Brooke Johnson help a driver during CarFit, a workshop for elderly drivers Tuesday at Our Lady of Nazareth Catholic Church in Roanoke County.