



Driving a Car



Restricted Growth Association

Working to benefit people with restricted growth and their families



DRIVING A CAR

This booklet is written primarily for people with a restricted growth condition who are thinking of learning to drive or getting their own car. It will answer many of the questions people have when they are thinking of driving:

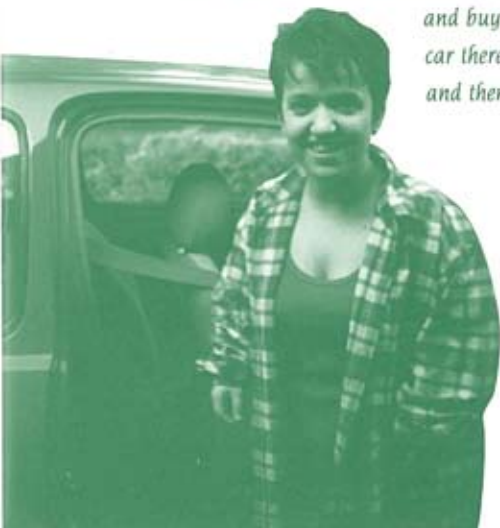
- What sort of car is suitable for me?
- What about adaptations and learning to drive?
- How do I go about finding a driving instructor?
- Are airbags dangerous for people of short stature?
- How do I get a driving licence?
- Do I qualify for an orange badge for parking?
- What about getting a suitably adapted car if mine is damaged in an accident?

Getting wheels

6 *Like many small people, my mobility is limited – learning to drive has really given me my independence and a feeling of self-sufficiency. I would say “Learn to drive as young you can” – the earlier the better, as you have less fear when you’re younger. 9*

When the time and opportunity are ripe for learning to drive, all you need is a licence, a car and someone to teach you... However, some people of restricted growth come up against obstacles when trying to become motorists.

6 *When I was younger, I was told that because of my size I wouldn't be allowed to drive a car and so for years I assumed I couldn't. Then I saw a programme on TV with a short person behind the wheel and I realised I could too. I was so excited, I wanted to go out and buy a car there and then! 9*



Finding the right car

6 *I didn't know where to start. I didn't know what kind of car I could drive, what sort of adjustments would need to be made, whether I'd need to get special permission or a special licence. 9*

Choosing the right car is often the hardest part of getting started as a driver. Any car you drive is likely to need modifications according to your exact body dimensions. Among the adaptations you may need are:

- pedal extensions (see photo)
- a platform for your feet or a raised/false floor
- extensions to the handbrake, gears and/or other controls
- a steering ball or small steering wheel
- steering modifications, e.g. power steering
- a cushion on the driver's seat and/or special lumbar support – supporting the back is important for people with achondroplasia and other conditions involving spinal stenosis
- hand controls to operate the foot pedals (if pedal extensions are unsuitable for you)
- a clip to adjust the height of seat belts, e.g. a Klunk Klip

- a boot lid aid, which allows the boot lid or hatchback door to be pulled down – devised by REMAP (address at end of booklet).

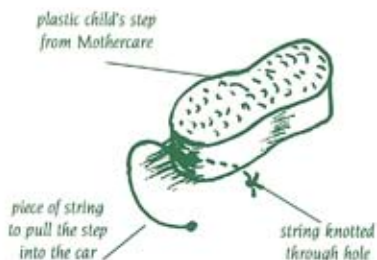
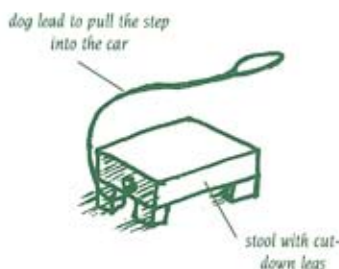
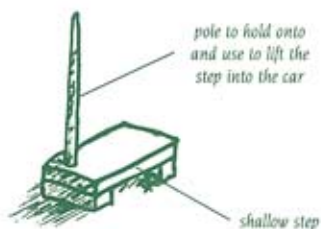
Most of these adaptations can be obtained through national or local suppliers. A good local mechanic can often help with the modifications, although it is vital to find one that is properly qualified. The RGA office may have up-to-date information about suppliers, garages and engineers in your area that have been recommended by members. Contact the RGA for details and contact numbers.

6 *Make sure you get good advice and don't let somebody "just have a go" at adaptations. It may be more expensive in the short run, but you can't skimp where safety is concerned. Also, don't put up with something you feel is not quite right – with a little time and effort, you can get most things to suit at least 99%. 9*

Custom-made adaptations

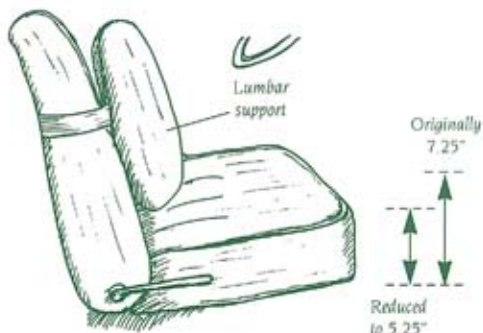
Individuals sometimes encounter particular difficulties to which they have to find their own imaginative solutions. For example, one older person of short stature had a

splendid new car fixed up with pedal extensions, but found the door sill too high for her to get into the car. Arthritis meant she could not lift her foot more than four inches off the floor. Possible solutions to this problem included:



Another problem described by an RGA member was being unable to reach the pedals, even with the car seat as far forward as possible. The shape of the seat pad was keeping his legs up in the air and away from the pedals. A local coach trimmer was found who reduced the height of the pad at the front from 7.25 inches (18.5 cm) to 5.25 inches (13.5 cm). A lumbar support cushion completed the job.

Another RGA member, married to a man of average stature, had her car modified in such a way that her husband could still drive it, without having the tedious task of unbolting pedal extensions every time he wanted to use it.



- 6 I had a second set of pedals fitted below the dashboard which I can reach but which still allows my husband to reach the other pedals on the floor (see photo). My car also has an extended gear stick and handbrake which both of us can use. I put the seat forward and use a lightweight stool as a removable 'floor' – to rest my feet on when I'm not using the pedals. 9



It is possible to obtain transferable car pedals, but at the time of writing these are only available from

the USA (contact details are available from the Restricted Growth Association).

Which car?

People with restricted growth drive all makes and models of car – from minis to large estates, although in an RGA driving survey, hatchbacks were found to be the most popular. The survey found that most of the cars driven by its members have foot controls, some have hand controls and a few have both. The decision about what kind of car to buy will also be influenced by insurance premiums – an easily forgotten but inevitable expense (see the section on insurance later in this booklet).

- 6 *In the 33 years since I passed my test, I have had 14 vehicles of various makes. My advice would be to get the seating of the vehicle arranged first – comfort is essential – then sort out the controls. 9*
- 6 *Go for a car with electric controls for things like wing mirrors and windows. And go for a BIG car (mine's a BMW) – it does the ego a world of good! 9*
- 6 *One major problem is getting into and out of the car when the seat is close to the wheel. You can buy a swivel seat that turns through 90°, so you can turn it to face out of the car door.*

A cheaper solution is to release the back of the seat so you can push it backwards. You can then put it upright again the next time you get in. 9

Many people of short stature prefer to drive automatics. With automatics there is no gear-changing and no clutch. This reduces the number of modifications needed, as well as the amount of work you have to do when driving.

- 6 *I was advised to buy an automatic car and to take the test in that, but it means I can't drive a manual. The garage bills with automatics can be higher. My advice would be to try to learn on a manual, even if you then buy an automatic. That way you have the choice. 9*

Learning to drive

Many people of short stature have to buy a car and modify it before learning to drive it, especially if they need pedal extensions. (Fitting these usually involves drilling through the existing pedals – something motoring schools aren't too keen to let you do.) Other people use cars belonging to parents or friends who agree to have the adaptations made to their cars.

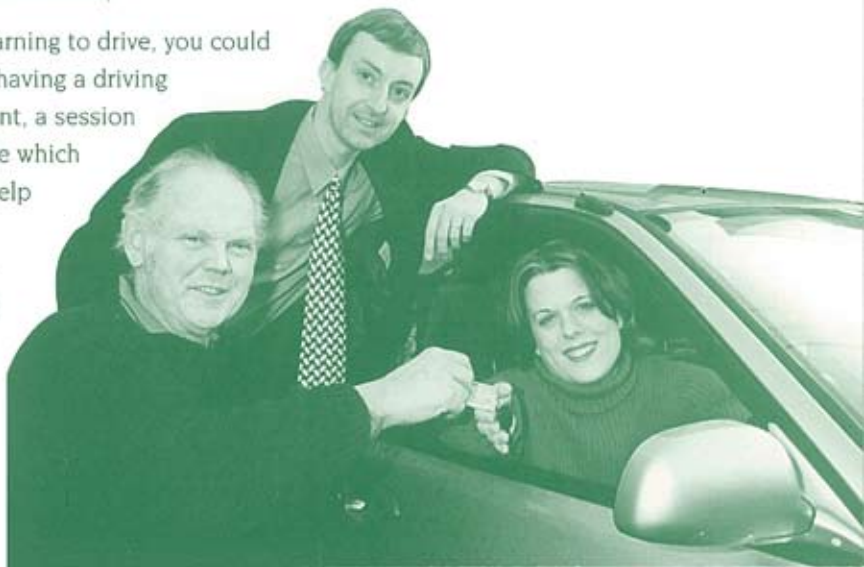
6 *My son learned to drive in my car. We have pedal extensions fitted which bolt on and off, depending on the user.* 9

Equipped with your own car, you can arrange driving lessons. Most people of short stature learn to drive with one of the smaller or sole-operator driving schools. Some larger motoring schools have cars they use specifically to teach disabled people, often an automatic with hand controls. It may be possible to learn to drive on such a car if you can't afford your own, but bear in mind the restrictions mentioned on the previous page if you take your test in an automatic. If you receive Disability Living Allowance, you may be able to get financial help with leasing a car (see 'Financial help with driving' later in this booklet).

Before learning to drive, you could consider having a driving assessment, a session at a centre which aims to help you find out what car might suit you and

what adaptations you might need. There are several centres offering assessment – details of these are given in the Department of Transport's leaflet, 'Guide to Services in the UK offering Advice, Information and Assessment to Disabled and Elderly Motorists', available from 1/11 Great Minster House, 76 Marsham Street, London SW1P 4DR, tel: 0171 271 5258.

6 *I was lucky when I learned to drive because my uncle owned a factory with a lot of land and I was able to learn the basics of driving before I went on the road. The experience I gained made learning to drive on public roads a lot easier. I would recommend anyone learning to drive to learn the basics on private roads (if possible) before venturing onto the public highway.* 9



Airbags

A *World in Action* programme shown in 1997 exposed the potential dangers of airbags, particularly to children and small adults, including people with a restricted growth condition. The danger arises because the short-statured driver has to sit close to the steering wheel and the explosive mechanism within the airbag that causes them to inflate can cause harm.

This potential danger has led many drivers with restricted growth to consider deactivating the airbags fitted in their cars. In the UK there is no law saying that airbags must be fitted or in use (unlike in the USA), so it is possible to ask a motor mechanic to deactivate the airbag. (*Removing* an airbag is a more difficult operation and motor manufacturers and mechanics are unlikely to agree to this for individual cars.)

Most of the research highlighting the dangers of airbags was done in the United States, where there are important differences in vehicles and driving habits. Cars tend to be bigger and so do the airbags which therefore have more powerful

mechanisms. Also, wearing seatbelts is not compulsory in the United States, so many occupants are unbelted and a larger airbag offers them more protection. This is in contrast to the UK, where more than 90% of people comply with the law and wear their seatbelts.

For drivers of restricted growth, the question is whether the benefits of deactivating the bag outweigh the dangers of injury in a crash. A small driver sitting very close to the steering wheel may sustain severe head injuries from the wheel, despite being belted in. However, if you have to sit very close to the wheel, even with extensions fitted to pedals and other controls, you may be at risk from the airbag mechanism. It may be possible to fit a steering wheel extension to enable you to sit further back from the wheel, but then longer extensions would need to be fitted to the other controls.

In the end, it is up to individual car drivers and users to make up their own minds. If you decide to deactivate your airbag, do remember to inform your insurance company in writing, and keep a

copy of the letter with your policy. If your insurance company questions your decision, invite them to read this booklet.

Copies of more detailed information relating to airbags can be obtained from the RGA office (send an A4 SAE, labelled 'Airbags').

Driving licences

Anyone who wants to drive needs a licence: you can apply for a provisional licence to learn to drive from the age of 17. If you are in receipt of the Disability Living Allowance higher mobility component (formerly Mobility Allowance), you can start to drive



at 16 – it is a good idea to apply for your provisional licence two or three months before your birthday, in case medical enquiries are thought necessary.

With effect from 1 December 1998 disabled motorists who require a driving licence for the first time have to specify any additional equipment they need to enable them to control a vehicle effectively. In the past, a general qualifier such as 'with controls to suit disability' has been included in a driving licence.

The change will be introduced merely on a self-declaration basis. The Driver & Vehicle Licensing Agency questionnaires which cover people with physical impairment will be amended to ask if special controls are, or will be, fitted. Any person answering 'yes' will be sent a further form asking them to indicate the types of special controls needed.

Existing licences which show 'with controls to suit disability' should not be returned for amendment. Licences will be amended when they are next sent to the DVLA for

any reason such as renewal or for change of address. Provisional licences will not be affected by the change. The change has been made to enable the UK to conform with European Union requirements.

Financial help with driving

People of restricted growth who experience pain or difficulty in walking could be eligible for the Mobility component of the Disability Living Allowance (formerly called Mobility Allowance). Your application will be helped by letters of support from your GP or hospital consultant where appropriate. The RGA will also provide a supporting letter for members and help with your application. The allowance can be used to lease a car or electric wheelchair through the Motability Scheme (contact tel: 01279 635666).

The Benefits Agency has a confidential telephone advice line which can offer general advice on Disability Living Allowance (tel: 0800 882200). It also has an advice line giving help with filling in claims forms (tel: 0800 441144).

Insurance

Like any driver, you will need motor insurance. If you are leased a car through Motability, they will insure it for you. Other drivers will need to arrange their own. Some insurance companies offer special schemes aimed at disabled drivers. The Disabled Drivers' Association produces a brochure listing firms that specialise in finding cover for disabled motorists. As with any type of insurance, it is always a good idea to shop around and get several quotes. Using a good, qualified insurance broker can save you time and money; the Disabled Drivers' Motor Club has a list of specialist brokers.

When you insure your car, tell your insurers about any adaptations made to your vehicle – it may prevent problems that can arise if you need to make a claim later. If you find any problems getting insurance or find you are being charged a higher rate, it is worth knowing that under the Disability Discrimination Act it is illegal for insurers to charge disabled drivers extra, unless they can produce

figures to show they are a greater risk. If you are 16 and able to drive, you may need to be persistent with some companies who may not have met a driver so young. Use this booklet as supporting evidence.

Car insurance for anyone under 25 can be very expensive and it is well worth checking the cost of insuring before buying a car. Two cars of similar engine size can cost vastly different amounts to insure and that may influence which model you go for.

Recovery & breakdown services

You should also consider protecting yourself against situations where your car breaks down by subscribing to a breakdown and recovery service, e.g. through the AA, RAC, National Breakdown, Britannia Rescue, etc. You can opt for different levels of cover, from basic roadside assistance to a wide range of extra benefits, including car hire, hotel accommodation or being transported on to your destination. Of course, the greater the level of cover the higher the cost of the premium. You may also find that services such as a

replacement hire car are no use to you if you can only drive a car with specific adaptations, although the next section describes one solution to this problem. Most breakdown services also ensure that members with disabilities are given priority if they need to call for assistance.

If you are unable to reach roadside telephones, it may be advisable to carry a mobile phone for use in emergencies.

Getting a replacement car

Any car you drive is likely to be customised to suit you. So, if your car is damaged or even written off in an accident, you will be affected much more seriously than someone of average stature. You probably can't just step into a replacement car and drive off. The adaptations you had before will need to be made to any new car. While that is being done, you may be left without transport, losing your mobility and independence for a time. Hiring a car is also not a straightforward option as suitably adapted hire cars simply don't exist (even assuming your insurance or the other driver's insurance will pay for a hire car, depending on whose fault it is).

The problem is made even worse when your car is written off, it wasn't your fault and the other driver has no insurance. This was the situation faced by one member of the Restricted Growth Association, but she found a solution that may be of use to other members in a similar predicament. She was put in touch with one particular hire car company who were prepared not only to have a hire car adapted for her use, but also to fight her case at no cost to her. They also undertook to supply a replacement permanent car with adaptations. The key factor in their offer was that the fault lay with the other driver. The company that took on this driver's case was Hire Car Gold, tel: 0500 335566.

You should check with your own insurance company what the situation would be if your car is written off. This may affect what type of cover you take out. For example, third-party insurance is much cheaper than comprehensive, but it does not cover damage to your own vehicle. Also, would you be covered for expenses incurred (e.g. taxis, use of a hire car) whilst a replacement car was being sorted out?

Parking

In the United Kingdom, local authorities run the Orange Badge Scheme which allow parking concessions for blind passengers or those with 'very considerable difficulty' in walking. Your local department of social services will supply details of parking privileges and how to apply for them (see the *Phone Book*). A badge is difficult to obtain if you do not receive, or have been refused, Mobility Allowance but it may still be possible with the help of your local Councillor, advice agency, or GP.

Sources of help & information

Advice on adaptations is available through the Restricted Growth Association. Other sources of help and information include:

- The Disabled Drivers' Association, Ashwellthorpe, Norwich NR16 1EX, tel: 01508 489449 – a self-help organisation which provides information (through leaflets and a journal), campaigns for disabled drivers' rights, negotiates concessions (e.g. on ferries, Eurotunnel and membership of breakdown organisations) and organises national and local activities.
- The Disabled Drivers' Motor Club Ltd, Cottingham Way, Thrapston, Northants NN14 4PL, tel: 01832 734724 – members can obtain discounts on some products and services, e.g. tyres, airport parking.
- REMAP – designs one-off solutions and adaptations to problems experienced by individuals. Among the gadgets they have designed is a car boot closer which is useful for helping people of short stature pull down the rear door of their car.
 - REMAP GB
'Hazeldene'
Ightham
Sevenoaks
Kent TN15 9AD
Tel: 01732 883818
 - REMAP (Scotland)
Maulside Lodge
Beith
Ayrshire KA15 1JJ
Tel: 01294 832566
- Bath Institute of Medical Engineering – has a project in train for designing a set of transferable car pedal extensions that can be used on any car.

For more information, contact:
Bath Institute of Medical
Engineering, Wolfson Centre,
Bath BA1 3NG, tel: 01225
824103.

- Institution of Mechanical Engineers, IMechE, 1 Birdcage Walk, London SW19 9JJ, tel: 0171 973 1277 – publishes *Guidelines for the Adaptation of Car Controls for Disabled Drivers*, commissioned by the Department of Transport (contact IMechE for current price).
- RADAR (the Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation), 12 City Forum, 250 City Road, London EC1V 8AF, tel: 0171 250 3222 – publishes a book on *Motoring and Mobility for Disabled People*, and a series of three *Mobility Fact Packs* (contact RADAR for current price).

This booklet was written by Hugh Hillyard-Parker, with the help of the many members and their families who have contributed their experiences towards it. Their contributions were compiled by RGA Information Officer, Ros Smith.

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The RGA encourages members to share information and sources of help.

Other RGA publications

What is...?

The **What is...?** series looks at particular restricted growth conditions or issues. The titles in this series are:

Achondroplasia

Hypochondroplasia

Pseudoachondroplasia

SED

Diastrophic Dysplasia

Rarer syndromes

Lifestyles

The **Lifestyles** series focuses on particular aspects of living with a restricted growth condition. The other titles in this series are:

Babies and the Early Years

Going to School

The Teenage Years

Careers, Employment and Education

Having a Baby

Adoption

The Later Years

Bikes, Trikes and Ride-on Toys

Sporting Opportunities

What Shall I Wear?

Limb Surgery

Personal Hygiene



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