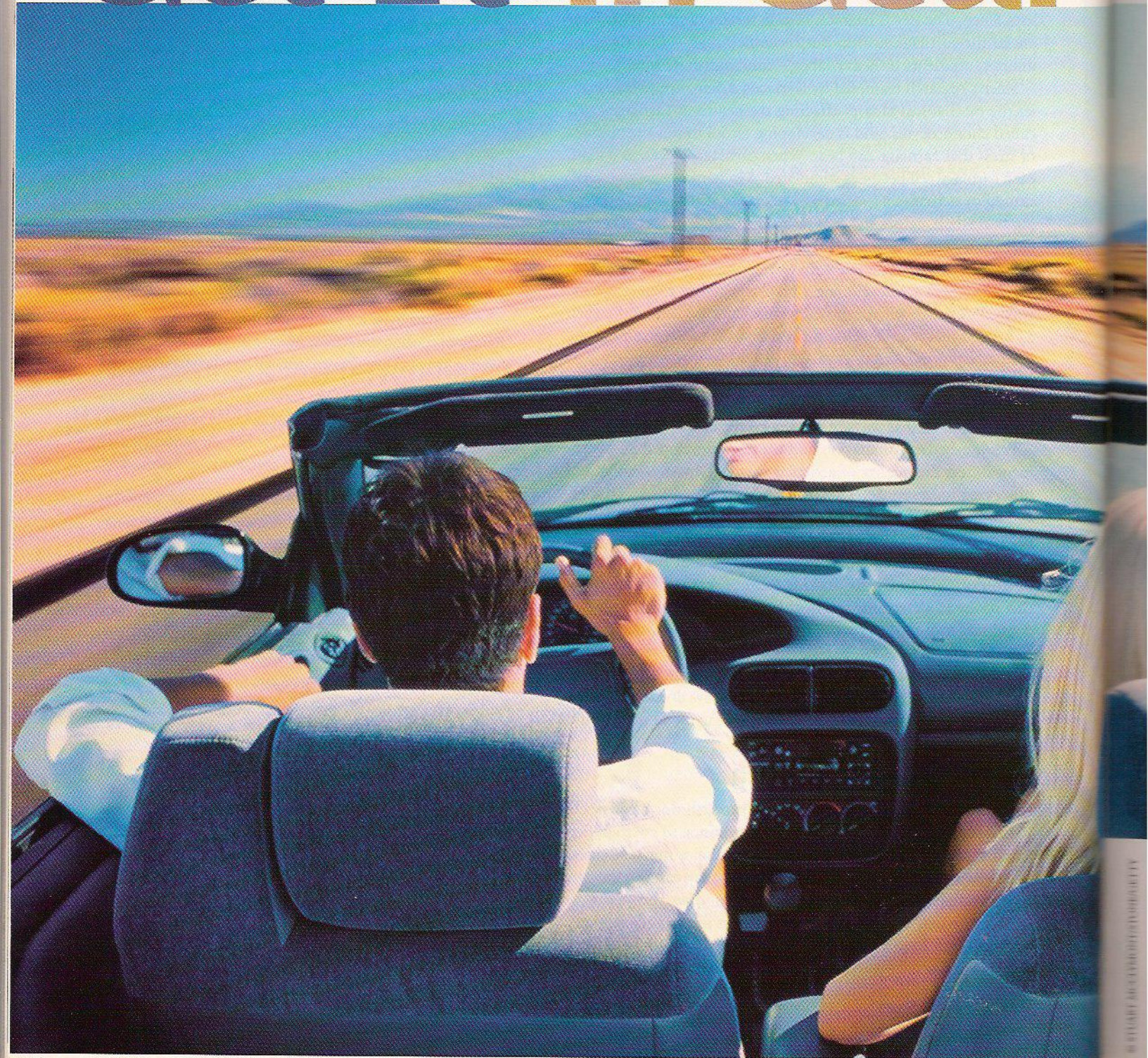


Exclusive Report

Get It in Gear



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What makes a car arthritis-friendly? We've got the details on the cars with features you can't do without, as well as some feel-good extras to make driving sweeter than ever.

BY LISSA POIROT



HOW DO YOU GET TO THE DOCTOR? To your office? To the drugstore to pick up a prescription? If you're like 200 million Americans, you use your car.

Unless you live in a major city with public transportation – and especially if you live in a sprawling suburb – you probably rely on your car to take you where you need to go. For people with arthritis, a car is about more than getting from point A to point B, it's a healthcare tool that allows them to make the trips their health routine requires – to the rheumatologist, the pharmacist, the physical therapist – without having to ask for help. For a person with arthritis, a car can be key to maintaining a feeling of independence.

Pat Stansbery of Pickerington, Ohio, who has rheumatoid arthritis (RA), uses her car three to five times per week. “My car is very important to me even though I no longer work,” she says. “I use it to run errands, do volunteer work weekly at my granddaughter's school, meet friends for lunch, and attend church activities and get to my doctor visits. Driving gives me the independence to feel normal and retain dignity.”

Debbie DeBartolo, of Rocky Ford, Colo., who has RA, misses the freedom of being behind the wheel now that her arthritis prevents her from comfortably driving the “no-frills” automobile that fits her family's budget. “It's vital for a person with arthritis to have a car they can drive,” she says.

For people like DeBartolo, an affordable arthritis-friendly car sounds as out of touch with today's reality as the jet packs on the futuristic cartoon “The Jetsons” do – even if a car that's comfortable for people with arthritis exists, wouldn't such a vehicle be far beyond the budgets of most people with arthritis? In this special report, *Arthritis Today* went straight to the source – our readers and car manufacturers – to learn what makes a car arthritis-friendly and where you can find one that won't break your budget.

The Essentials

To find truly arthritis-friendly cars, we enlisted the help of *Arthritis Today* readers, who spoke up about what features work – and which don't – for people with arthritis. Their answers were a starting point for our list of arthritis-friendly cars (see page 74). Then we looked at newly available features that have an arthritis advantage.

Arthritis Today Readers' Top Five Favorite Cars *

1 Buick LeSabre



2 Toyota Camry



3 Mercury Sable



4 Honda Accord



5 Mercury Grand Marquis



Our first question was simple: What makes a car arthritis-friendly? The subject struck a nerve with *Arthritis Today* readers, more than 300 of whom responded. Their answers varied from the simple – power steering – to the high-tech – seats with built-in heating pads – but 10 features (which we call the Arthritis Auto Essentials) were so frequently cited that cars whose standard models don't include them didn't make our list. In order of priority, the Arthritis Auto Essentials are

- 1) Power steering
- 2) Automatic transmission
- 3) Power windows and locks
- 4) Height-adjustable seating
- 5) Electronic-controlled passenger-side mirrors
- 6) Tilt steering wheel
- 7) Keyless trunk
- 8) Keyless entry
- 9) Easy-release seat belt latches
- 10) Cruise control

They seem like common features, yet *Arthritis Today* readers say it's hard to find all of them together in one model at an affordable price.

Finding an affordable car with all of the Arthritis Essentials may have been a challenge as recently as a few years ago, but many of today's vehicles offer the Essentials more affordably than you might think. Sure, you can find them standard in luxury models but the Arthritis Auto Essentials also come standard in cars from mid-price lines, too, including Buick, Oldsmobile and Volkswagen. Even cars that don't include the Essentials standard may have them available as relatively inexpensive options.

We also uncovered a new wave of easy-on-your-joints features that some of our readers didn't even know existed. Most of these high-tech extras are available today only as upgrades, but they could become as standard as power locks in another few years. One sign that these extras may be a sign of things to come is the fact that they're available through most dealerships – people with arthritis no longer have to visit after-market specialists for modifications; arthritis-friendly modifications are available right on the lot or through a standard order.

These easy-on-your-joints features rated high on the arthritis-friendliness scale:

Adaptive cruise control. Cruise control takes stress off knees, legs, ankles and feet during long drives, but every time you come up on a slower car or a major curve, you have to break, slow down and reset the controls. Adaptive cruise control uses



sensors to register obstacles in your path and automatically adjusts your speed to meet them.

Heated and cooled seats. Heated seats are a boon for people whose joints and back get stiff and sore in the driver's seat. Cooled seats may help ease pain, too.

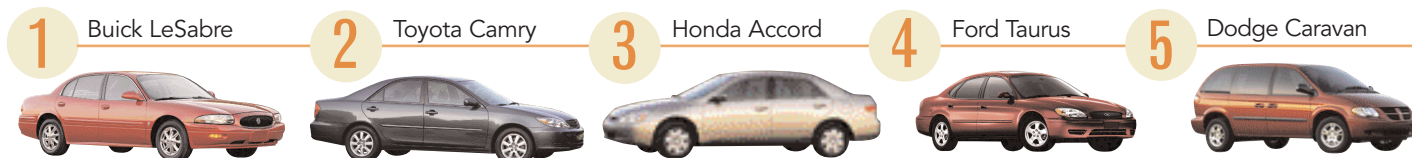
Heated steering wheels. A warm steering wheel lets cold, stiff fingers relax, so gripping the wheel is more comfortable and less painful.

Massaging seats. It's like putting your favorite massage chair into your car. Massage seats luxuriously stave off back pain on long and short drives.

Power adjustable pedals. Adjustable pedals mean you don't have to put up with pain in your lower legs on long drives – power adjustable pedals mean you can get a comfortable position for your pedals with just the push of a button. Many even have built-in memory chips that let you "save" your favorite position so it's easy to readjust after another driver makes a change.

Rear sensors. Rear sensors let you know when an object is behind you, reducing the need to twist and turn uncomfortably when you're trying to back out of a tight parking place. Some cars even have front sensors.

Top Five Cars Currently Owned by *Arthritis Today* Readers *





The most common complaints readers have about the design of cars*

- Cars are awkward to get into and out of.
- Car seats are difficult to adjust.
- Gear shifts are a challenge to maneuver.
- Heated steering wheels are not standard.
- Cars are just plain uncomfortable.
- Seatbelts are near impossible to use and uncomfortable to wear.
- Car seats need better lumbar support.
- Costs are too high.
- Controls are too fussy, small and hard to use.
- Running boards are not standard on trucks and SUVs.

New Year, New Models

These new models for 2005, set to debut just before or after the new year, have all the Arthritis Auto Essentials.

- Buick's Terraza van has SUV styling and all-wheel drive. The LaCrosse sedan includes easy-to-reach push-button, power controls on the doors, dash and steering wheel.
- Cadillac's STS replaces the discontinued Seville.
- The Chevrolet Cobalt is available as a coupe or sedan and includes options like heated seating.
- Ford's Freestyle SUV features second and third row seating that folds flat for extra storage and can accommodate even tall adult passengers comfortably. The Five Hundred Series sedan claims easy entry and exit with its high-package seating positions.
- Infiniti's Q series is luxury choice complete with voice recognition controls for climate, audio and even navigation. The M series has 10-way power driver's seat with power lumbar adjustment and two-position memory, as well as extra-friendly

bells and whistles, like heated seating.

- The Land Rover LR3 has five rear seats that fold down flat to reveal an extra-large cargo space.
- Mercedes-Benz's Vision Grand Sport Tourer is a six-seating SUV/hatchback combination with second-row seating that provides the same comforts found in the front seats.
- Mercury's Mariner provides SUV comfort in a compact – a.k.a., more affordable – model, while the Montego sedan features fold-down rear and front passenger seats for extra cargo room.
- The G6 sedan and Solstice convertible are new from Pontiac this fall.
- Saab's first SUV, the 9-7X, features OnStar navigation and a rear DVD player.
- Saturn's Relay is described as "family utility vehicle."
- The Volvo V50 is a versatile sportswagon featuring new keyless ignition system.

Push-button ignition. Forget fumbling with keys – now you can start a car with nothing more than the tip of your finger. The high-tech option – fingerprint pads that start your car after verifying your identity – is pricey, but lower-cost push-button keying controls are more affordable and just as easy.

Motorized seats. For some people with arthritis, getting in and out of the car – especially with high-off-the-ground SUVs or second-row backseats – is more challenging than actually driving. Motorized seats swing out of minivans and SUVs to deposit passengers on firm ground.

Easier-to-use controls. Easy-to-grip knobs and fewer overall knobs, buttons and dials on the dash are a boon for swollen fingers and hands and reduce distraction potential for all drivers.

Voice controls. Voice activation lets you change radio stations or ask for directions from your car's navigations system without taking your hands off the wheel.

Style and Substance

Cars today are more arthritis-friendly than they've ever been, yet too many *Arthritis Today* readers weren't able to find one to suit their needs. Where's the disconnect?

Flip on the television, and the answer becomes clearer. The cars in those sleek, rock'n'roll commercials don't exactly scream arthritis-friendly, but once you get close to them, you'll start noticing things that might surprise you: curved door handles that are comfortable to grip; overhead bars to make getting in and out of the car easier; oversized print on the dash and speedometer, and maybe even space for a scooter in the trunk. It's something car companies have learned: All drivers, not just those with arthritis, appreciate ergonomic design, but it's image – not ergonomics – that sells cars. So those arthritis-

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*Based on responses to an Arthritis Today reader survey.

†From Arthritis Today MRI statistics.

Everything You Want in a Car – and More

The cars in the chart below are current standard-model cars, in almost every price range, that come with *Arthritis Today* readers' top 10 Arthritis Auto Essentials. (See the chart at right for the full list of Essentials.) Even better, we found that many of these cars include arthritis-friendly extras, like heated seats and rear sensors, included in the standard model or as an upgrade. Because we know what you can have, need or want in a car depends on your budget, your lifestyle and your own preferences, we've created this chart to be a great starting point when it comes time to select your next car.

	Acura ^{††}	Audi ^{††}	Buick ^{††}	Cadillac ^{††}	Chevrolet Corvette	Chevrolet Monte Carlo
Starting Price	\$20,175	\$26,270	\$22,700	\$32,395	\$44,245	\$22,710
Adaptive cruise control	x	x	x	x	x	x
Heated seats	x		x	x	x	
Cooled seats						
Heated steering wheel				x		
Massaging seat				x		
Power adjustable pedals					x	x
Push-button ignition				x	x	
Rear sensors				x		
Motorized seats	x	x	x	x	x	x
Easy-to-use controls	x	x	x	x	x	
Voice controls	x			x		
	Ford Thunderbird	Hyundai Sonata	Hyundai XG350	Infiniti	Jaguar ^{††}	Kia Amanti
Starting Price	\$38,040	\$15,999	\$23,999	\$30,300	\$29,995	\$25,585
Adaptive cruise control		x	x	x	x	x
Heated seats	x	x	x	x	x	x
Cooled seats		x		x		
Heated steering wheel		x		x	x	
Massaging seat						
Power adjustable pedals				x		
Push-button ignition					x	
Rear sensors		x	x			x
Motorized seats	x	x	x	x		x
Easy-to-use controls	x	x	x	x	x	
Voice controls				x		
	Mercury ^{††}	Nissan Maxima	Nissan SE-R	Nissan SUVs	Oldsmobile Alero	Pontiac Montana
Starting Price	\$22,025	\$27,100	\$17,400	\$18,100	\$18,825	\$24,050
Adaptive cruise control	x	x	x	x	x	x
Heated seats	x	x		x		x
Cooled seats						
Heated steering wheel	x	x				
Massaging seat						
Power adjustable pedals	x			x		
Push-button ignition	x					
Rear sensors				x		
Motorized seats	x	x		x	x	x
Easy-to-use controls	x	x	x	x	x	x
Voice controls		x		x		x

^{††} All models contain Arthritis Essentials.

Top 10 Arthritis Essentials

- 1 Power steering
- 2 Automatic transmission
- 3 Power windows and locks
- 4 Height-adjustable seating
- 5 Electronic-controlled passenger-side mirrors
- 6 Tilt steering wheel
- 7 Keyless trunk
- 8 Keyless entry
- 9 Easy-release seat belt latches
- 10 Cruise control



WORTH A TEST DRIVE The **Buick LeSabre** ranked No. 1 on *Arthritis Today* readers' list of top 10 cars. It's also one of the top models identified by car authority Edmunds.com as a car that can easily accommodate someone with mobility limitations.

	Chevrolet SSR	Chrysler ^{††}	Dodge Intrepid	Ford Crown Victoria
	\$43,055	\$18,080	\$22,035	\$24,345
	x	x	x	x
	x	x		
		x		x
		x		
		x	x	
	x	x	x	x
	x	x	x	x
		x		
Land Rover ^{††}	Lexus ^{††}	Lincoln ^{††}	Mazda MPV	
\$25,995	\$29,980	\$33,005	\$23,490	
x	x	x	x	
x	x	x		
x	x	x		
x	x	x		
x				x
x				x
	x			
Pontiac GTO	Toyota SUVs	Volkswagen Golf	Volvo ^{††}	
\$32,495	\$18,990	\$15,580	\$23,260	
x	x	x	x	
		x	x	
				x
				x
x	x	x	x	
x	x		x	

They Almost Had It All

If your favorite car didn't make the cut, it's probably because one or more of the Arthritis Auto Essentials wasn't included on its standard model. Since in most cases, those missing Essentials are available as an upgrade – and since sometimes it's worth paying a little extra to make the car of your dreams arthritis-friendly – we wanted to highlight the cars that missed the list by only one feature.

Ford Freestar (starting at about \$24,600) lacks standard cruise control.

General Motors Safari (starting at about \$25,935) lacks standard keyless entry.

Mazda's 6 and **Tribute** (both starting about \$19,000) lack standard automatic transmission.

Honda Accord (starting at about \$16,195) and **Civic** (\$13,160) lack standard automatic transmission.

Pontiac Aztek (starting at about \$22,000) lacks standard cruise control.

BMW (models starting at \$29,300), **Saab** (\$22,990) and **Subaru** (\$21,295) lack standard automatic transmission.

How We Rated the Cars

We asked 500 randomly selected *Arthritis Today* readers to tell us about their experience with cars, asking among other things what makes a car really comfortable for people with arthritis, what their favorite cars and features are and what they'd like to see in new cars. We compared those answers to the cars available on the market right now to determine which cars really meet the needs of people with arthritis. If we've missed a car you think should have been on our list, send a note to the address on page 10.

Is Your Car a Good Fit?

When driving is a pain in the neck (and the knees and the hips), it may be partly because your car isn't built to accommodate your joints' needs. Like people who are very tall or very short, people who have arthritis may have trouble just getting into and out of the car, much less finding a comfortable position once they've gotten inside. And even though *Arthritis Today* readers list vehicle height as one of the top problems with today's cars, there's no one right height for a driver with arthritis.

For people like Dalis Dolan, 50, of Port Royal, Penn., who has osteoarthritis (OA) and rheumatoid arthritis and recently had a hip replacement, high cars, like SUVs, are easier to get in and out of, while people who have arthritis in their knees, like Christine Driggers, 55, of Carpentaria, Calif., who has OA, lupus and fibromyalgia, may find getting into those high seats excruciatingly painful.

How do you know what car height will be most comfortable for you? Start by thinking about where your arthritis affects you the most – in general, lower cars are more comfortable for people who have arthritis in their arms and shoulders, while higher cars are easier for people who have arthritis in their knees or hips. What makes a car high or low depends to some extent on your height – a tall car for a five-foot woman might be a short car for a six-foot man – so keep these factors in mind at your next test-drive.

Are running boards a standard or optional accessory? Running boards can be helpful for climbing into higher vehicles, such as trucks, minivans and SUVs. If you like the idea of running boards but not the look, some vehicles offer retractable running boards that you can open with a remote control when you need them and slide back in when you don't.

Are driver's side grab handles available? Most new cars have grab handles on the passenger side, but driver's side handles are sorely missing. Some manufacturers will install them – find out what the charge will be. Overhead grab handles can help people with arthritis in the knees and hips get a stable grip, while dash-mounted handles that don't require reaching are a better choice for people with arthritis in arms, hands and shoulders.

Does the vehicle let you easily adjust seat height? Manual seat adjustments that require bending, reaching and scooting can be a challenge for people with arthritis. "After my hip surgery, I could drive, but I couldn't bend forward. My son created a handle for my seat so that I could adjust it without bending," says Marian Blenke of Mason, Ohio. Power seat adjustments let you get your seat into a comfortable position just by pressing a button. If you're frequently a pas-



senger, you'll want to make sure the passenger seat has power adjustments, too – some cars include it only on the driver's side.

Is there a memory feature available? If you share a car with another driver, even occasionally, this feature can save you the effort of trying to return the seat to your perfect position after it's been driven by someone else. Just push the memory button, and the seat slides back to your set position.

Other things that can make getting in and out of the car easier, whatever your condition or your height, include bench seating, which lets you slide in and out; doors wide enough to accommodate easy entry – but not so wide that you have trouble pulling the door closed by yourself; and retractable steps, available on some SUVs and minivans, that let you climb to a comfortable height for entering the vehicle.

Driving With Arthritis The Arthritis Foundation recently teamed up with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to produce "Driving With Arthritis," a fact-packed brochure with tips on driving safely with limited mobility. To request a free copy, visit <http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/outreach/media/catalog>.

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 73]

friendly modifications often appear with little or no fanfare.

“We don’t try to design a car to be a ‘grandma car,’ or a ‘mom car,’ or a ‘teenager’ car,” says Eero Laansoo, a Ford Motor Company human factors engineer. “A well-designed vehicle is stylish and appealing for a wide age range.”

Take, for example, the Ford Focus, one of Ford’s popular mid-priced models. Few people think of the Focus as a car for older drivers, but that’s exactly what it was designed to be when Ford’s engineers and designers started to work on it back in 1998. The Focus was conceived based on a then-revolutionary idea – in order to create a car that was truly comfortable for people with limited mobility, the engineers and designers would actually experience for themselves the challenges a limited mobility driver faces behind the wheel.

Most comfortable type of car to drive[†]

Sedan **53 %** • Minivan **16 %** • SUV **12 %** • Coupe **5 %**
• Light truck **5 %** • Other/unanswered **10 %**

Ford created the Third Age suit, an ensemble that turns able-bodied designers and engineers into limited-mobility drivers. Wearing the suit, designers feel the joints in their fingers, hands, shoulders, hips and knees stiffen, as happens with arthritis. Their neck loses range of motion. Their vision is blurred to mimic the effects of cataracts.

“It’s all good and well to hear from a customer how they may have a problem, but sometimes you have to experience it to really get the idea of what’s going on,” says Laansoo. “With firsthand experience and empathy, you can create a design that really addresses a person’s needs.”

With this kind of research in its development, it’s no surprise that older drivers liked the Focus – a sleek, young-looking car, yes, but one with swivel seats that rotate a full 90 degrees; oversized control knobs; plenty of headroom; and even an optional foldaway trunk lift that safely stows a scooter. What did surprise Ford was that younger drivers – attracted to the affordable price tag and sleek design – also flocked to the Focus, proving that ergonomic extras can be just as appealing to younger drivers as to older ones.

There’s another factor at work, too. According to a *New York Times* report, today’s average car buyer is 46 years old, which barely even counts as middle-aged today when people are living and working longer than ever before. A 46-year-old car buyer may want a car that’s comfortable to drive, but that doesn’t mean she wants a car that makes her feel like a grandmother.

“People with arthritis aren’t always old,” says Nina Aguilar, 49, of Colorado Springs, Colo. “I need the ergonomic stuff, but I want sexy styles and colors, too.”

Self Improvement

Just because the Arthritis Auto Essentials are available and affordable doesn’t mean, of course, everyone will end up buying a car that has everything he needs. Your current car may be mostly fine, or you may fall head-over-heels in love with a car that doesn’t include some of the Essentials. That doesn’t mean you have to settle for a less-than-comfortable ride. There are simple adaptations that make any car more arthritis-friendly.

Ready-made ergonomic products can solve a myriad of problems behind the wheel. Consider these:

Swivel seats. Swivel seats can make getting in and out of your car easier. The DMI Swivel Seat Cushion (\$24.95, www.seniorshops.com) rotates a full 360 degrees and fits on most standard-size car seats. Because it’s portable, it’s a great option for a second car.

Cushions. If driving causes you back pain, a strategically placed cushion can make a world of difference. The Foam Therapeutic Lumbar Cushion (\$39.95, www.drivingcomfort.com) eliminates pressure points and supports your back.

Gas Cap Wrenches. If you have trouble unscrewing your gas cap, get a little help from the RAM Gas Cap Wrench (\$9.95, 262-797-9449). You just place it over your car’s gas cap, lightly push, and the cap will easily open.

Massage cushions. If driving makes the pain in your back and knees flare, a Massaging Seat Cushion (\$79.99, www.aplusseatcovers.com) gently pulses to reduce pain.

Remote starters. Consider upgrading your ignition with a remote starter like the EZ-2500 Remote Car Starter (\$64.99, www.slickcar.com), which turns your keychain into a push-button ignition. Some car models may not work with remote ignition, and you may need to have this feature professionally installed.

Grab bars. If climbing in and out high cars is hard for you, a quick fix for missing grab handles is the portable Car Caddie (\$19.99, www.dynamic-living.com), which easily attaches to your car’s window frame and provides a stable grip.

With arthritis-friendly cars already affordable and more high-tech easy-to-use gadgets on the horizon, it’s easier than ever to stay independent – and in the driver’s seat – when there’s somewhere to go. 🚗

Lissa Poirot is Arthritis Today’s Managing Editor.

Additional reporting by Melanie Lasoff Levs.

Help for Drivers with Arthritis

Ford and General Motors both offer assistance programs for drivers with disabilities, providing as much as \$1,000 in cash upfront assistance to help pay for adaptive devices. Other manufacturers, including Audi, Daimler Chrysler Corporation, Saturn and Volkswagen, give rebates or reimbursements for after-the-fact modifications on new cars. Contact your state’s Department of Vocational Rehabilitation for more information.