

When I started learning to drive I found it very challenging – but I got there eventually, after two years and four tests. I drive an automatic and I started with a steering ball and an extension on the left hand indicator but I now manage without them. I have been driving for four years now and have driven many miles now, from Suffolk to Cornwall, and I love it.

Can anyone with hemiplegia learn to drive?

Many people with hemiplegia can learn to drive, usually an automatic car with power steering and modifications to the controls as necessary (e.g. steering ball, indicator lever extension or infra-red control, swivel seat, pedal adaptation for those with right hemiplegia).

A visual impairment or a learning disability may be a barrier to becoming a driver, and anyone with epilepsy must be seizure free for one year (with or without medication) to hold a licence. When applying for a provisional licence epilepsy must be declared along with hemiplegia and anything else that might affect your ability to drive. Go to www.direct.gov.uk/en/motoring and follow links to find out more about learning to drive and download a medical form to send with your application.

Learning to drive

You will then have to have an assessment to check whether you will be able to drive and what adaptations you will need. There is generally a charge for assessments, and prices vary from centre to centre. The **Forum of Mobility Centres** www.mobility-centres.org.uk has a network of centres around the UK and its extensive website has all kinds of information and links for disabled drivers. Although independent, the centres are recognised by other mobility organisations including **Motability** and the **Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA)**.

Having now been driving for nearly two years, I can look back at learning as a positive experience. It took two years to learn and literally hundreds of hours of lessons and practice. Road positioning was perhaps the hardest thing I faced – it took me a long time to be able to drive in a straight line and thereby stay in a good position on the road - at one point my instructor even voiced his doubts as to whether or not I should carry on at all. In addition, making judgments at speed took a lot of practice. Nevertheless, with perseverance and determination I did get there, and this can be true for many others with hemiplegia. The very fact that it took me so long indicates that driving can and did prove difficult, yet not impossible. Having a specialist instructor with the necessary patience was invaluable.

I drive auto, but some people do manage manual...it's down to the individual I think.....Because I'm right hemi, it caused me a problem with the pedals, I have little control over my right foot/leg.....so I cross my legs over a bit, and drive left footed. Since I learned this way and passed my test this way, it's not a problem..... my hand isn't too bad and I manage most things ok, with practice.

Do you get DLA?

Originally, due to under emphasis of my disability, I was on the lower rate, but thankfully, through help with form filling via welfare advice, my allowance was reviewed, changed to the higher rate, enabling me to have a vehicle through the scheme. The cars are changed every three years and are fully covered for insurance and servicing.

If you are getting the DLA higher rate mobility component you can:

- learn to drive when you are 16, and apply 3 months before that
- if aged between 16 and 24, possibly get help towards the cost of driving lessons
- lease or hire purchase a car through **Motability** www.motability.co.uk. If you start by applying for a grant from Motability they will pay for your assessment. They may also pay for adaptations.
- apply for a Blue Badge for free parking, a parking bay and road tax exemption. You don't have to drive yourself for this or to access the Motability scheme – someone else can drive you.
- qualify, as a Blue Badge holder, for a 100 per cent exemption from the London Congestion Charge, but you must register with **Transport for London (TfL)** at least 10 days before your journey and pay a one-off £10 registration fee. For more information phone 0845 900 1234 or download a registration form from the TfL website www.tfl.gov.uk/assets/downloads/cc-discount-blue-badge.pdf

I have a Motability car which I find essential for my independence – it allows me a tremendous amount of freedom.

My Ford Fiesta, chosen from a range of cars, colours, etc. has adaptations, which include a flip accelerator pedal, steering wheel knob and controls, and I had to fund these myself; however the car itself has been provided through the Motability scheme.

I'm on my fourth car from them. Up till now it's been great, though this year some of the non returnable deposits have gone sky high. But there are still a number of cars you can get without paying a deposit. You get road tax paid, a car tax disc sent to you if anything goes wrong with the car it's fixed for free, you get replacement tyres, free recovery, free replacement car if needed (if the car has adaptations you might not get an exact replacement while yours is off road). Insurance is also included. If you have a look at the website you can see what the prices are, also they change the nil deposit cars and low deposits every 6 months so sometime you can get lucky.

Many HemiHelp members are enthusiastic about Motability, however not everyone has had a good experience of the scheme. Many cars need a deposit (and for an automatic more than a manual), and some people feel there is a lack of choice. Adaptations may need to be paid for, although some grants are available. Some members have preferred to buy a car on a loan in the normal way and use DLA to cover monthly repayments.

The main problem I have had is finding automatics that are affordable on Motability, there is very little choice, especially when we have 4 kids to consider, so need a 6 seater. Three years ago ended up with a manual, and my husband drives, which is most annoying for me, but it was necessary for us to have a car. We have just needed to reorder, and have again ended up with manual, as the advanced payment on an auto was huge, approx £2000... we struggled to pay the £350 for the manual. There are a huge number of smaller manual cars with a zero deposit, but very few on auto even for a small car.

If you do not have higher rate DLA you may still be eligible for a Blue Badge- contact your Local Authority for more information.

You may also be able to get financial help for learning to drive and adaptations from charity sources (see links below) or through your local social services or the **Access to Work** scheme (contact your local Jobcentre Plus for more information).

Also, people with a disability do not have to pay VAT on having a vehicle adapted to suit their condition, or on the lease of a Motability vehicle. For more information go to the **Revenue & Customs** site www.hmrc.gov.uk/vat/sectors/consumers/disabled.htm

HMRC does not require you to be receiving DLA to qualify – the site has HMRC's own form to fill in where you just have to state that you have a disability.

Buying Secondhand

You can buy converted vehicles secondhand, and many Motability cars come on the market when their three year lease is up, but bear in mind that there may be safety issues, and you should factor in any fitting costs.

Look for advertisements in **Disability Now** and other newspapers and newsletters produced by disability organisations. To subscribe to Disability Now go to www.disabilitynow.org.uk or call 0845 120 7001. The **Disabled Living Foundation** has a list of sources of secondhand equipment - follow the link to factsheets at www.dlf.org.uk or call 0845 130 9177.

Disability Equipment Register www.patient.co.uk/support/Disability-Equipment-Register This is a website with advertisements for secondhand equipment for disabled users, including adapted vehicles.

eBay www.ebay.co.uk has a section for Disabled Vehicles which covers adapted vehicles

Justmobility www.justmobility.co.uk You can buy or sell secondhand adapted vehicles on their site. They also have a range of other information on the Shopmobility scheme, travel and holidays, for example.

The Spinal Injuries Association www.spinal.co.uk/pdf/factsheet_buyingandselling.pdf is their factsheet with a list of publications advertising second hand equipment, including cars.

Insurance

Getting car insurance can be a problem for disabled drivers, especially young ones. The following companies offer cover (for 16 year olds as well).

Chartwell Insurance www.chartwellinsurance.co.uk Tel: 020 8958 0900

En Route Insurance www.enrouteinsurance.co.uk Tel: 0800 783 7245 Email: info @enrouteinsurance.co.uk

Fish Insurance www.fishinsurance.co.uk Tel: 01772 724442 Email: info@fishinsurance.co.uk

KF Garner & Company www.mobilityinsure.com Tel: 01925 633807 Email: insurance@kfgarner.co.uk

Tesco Insurance www.Tesco-Car-Insurance.co.uk Telephone for a quote as website will not give accurate quote for 16 year old driver.

Other useful links

www.direct.gov.uk/en/DisabledPeople/MotoringAndTransport The government site with information on all aspects of motoring and transport.

Mobilise www.mobilise.info incorporates the former Disabled Drivers Association. It campaigns on behalf of disabled drivers and has an information service and a monthly magazine on all aspects of mobility.

Mobility Information Service www.mis.org.uk This is an organisation run mostly by disabled people which was originally set up as an assessment centre but now provides information and advice on a range of mobility questions. The website includes a list of possible sources of financial help.

There is an interactive online map at www.direct.gov.uk/bluebadgemap with details of Blue Badge parking bays, local council parking rules, accessible public toilets, train stations, shopmobility centres, accessible beaches and much more across the UK.

'The Concise UK Road Atlas for Blue Badge Holders' provides the same information in book form. Available at www.thepieguide.com/shop

A standardised European parking card for people with disabilities has been adopted. If you have been issued with the new blue card, you are entitled to the same parking concessions in other EU member states, and in some other European countries, that are given to disabled residents of those countries. For more details go to www.focusondisability.org.uk/reciprocal-park-europe.html

HemiHelp has a range of information sheets for both families where there is a child with hemiplegia and adults with the condition, as well as a Useful Names and Addresses List to help you contact other organisations.

Hemiplegia is a neurological condition that weakens one side of the body and affects one child in a thousand. It is sometimes described as a form of cerebral palsy and the effects are similar to those of a stroke. **HemiHelp** is a membership organisation offering information and support to children and adults affected by hemiplegia and their families.

HemiHelp is happy for you to make photocopies of any part of this document.

Helpline: 0845 123 2372 (Mon-Fri 10am-1pm)

Admin: 0845 120 3713 • Fax: 0845 120 3723

Email: support@hemihelp.org.uk • Web: www.hemihelp.org.uk

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