

Video exercises aid driving skills

Allstate targeting those over 50 with 'brain fitness' tool

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Allstate Corp. wants to reduce the number of senior moments, and accidents, among drivers ages 50 and older.

The Northbrook-based home and auto insurer soon will begin testing a program in which it is asking 100,000 Pennsylvanians ages 50 to 75 to try computer-based video exercises in hopes of improving the way their brains process visual information.

Allstate's partner in the endeavor is San Francisco-based Posit Science Corp., which makes "brain fitness" software. The tool used in the Allstate test is called InSight, which is designed to improve a driver's visual alertness and mental abilities.

Allstate, which called the Posit program "potentially the next big breakthrough in automobile safety," said it expects its software exercises to reduce risky driving maneuvers by up to 40 percent and improve stopping distance by an average of 22 feet when traveling at 55 miles per hour.

Older drivers have higher rates of fatal crashes, based on miles driven, than any other group except young drivers, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. The high death rate is due in large part to their frailty.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration said 6,017 people age 65 and older were killed in traffic crashes in 2006. This represents 14 percent of Americans killed on the road.

NHTSA estimates there were 30 million licensed drivers age 65 and older in 2006, an 18 percent increase from 1996, and the number of mature drivers will continue to rise.

Other insurers are also undertaking efforts to improve senior driving skills.

Bloomington, Ill.-based State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Co. and

the University of Alabama at Birmingham have a 4-year-old program to measure and potentially improve cognitive skills of drivers 75 and older. State Farm customers in Alabama who are in that age group can take a 20-minute cognitive-skill assessment to see if they qualify for discounts, and they also can sign up for a free driving-skills program.

The Allstate guinea pigs are being asked to complete at least 10 hours of training on software that Posit is providing for free. While Allstate said it is offering the program to make roads safer, it also is considering offering discounts to drivers who use the InSight exercises.

The Pennsylvania test runs through March. Then, Allstate will determine whether to introduce the program elsewhere.

The software includes five exercises. In one designed to improve visual processing speed, drivers take a trip on Route 66 from California to Illinois. Along the way, they have to spot various cars on the road and signs on the edges of the screen.

In another exercise to enhance such skills as visual precision, participants are photographers taking pictures of birds in Florida, California, and Costa Rica. To get the shots, participants have to locate the right bird among a group of similar birds when they flash quickly on screen.

Posit Science will collect the results but will share only training hours logged with Allstate. Individual results remain anonymous.

"We'll look to see whether over the next six to nine months there will be a reduction in" the number of accidents between the group participating in the video exercises and those sitting out, said Tom Warden, assistant vice president of Allstate's research and planning center.

"Effects of the training can last up to three years without a refresher," he said.

About 200 customers signed up Monday, the first day that people could register.

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