

Distracted driving: an avoidable risk

Texting is just one factor in a leading cause of vehicle crashes



Our complacency is killing us. Americans believe there is nothing we can do to stop crashes from happening, but that isn't true."

– Deborah A.P. Hersman
National Safety Council
President and CEO.¹



According to a recent National Safety Council (NSC) poll,² distracted driving ranks near the top of traffic safety concerns for drivers – second only to drunken driving. They are right to be worried. Distracted driving claimed 3,477 lives in 2015 alone.³

As many as 40,000 people died in motor vehicle crashes in 2016 – the most traffic fatalities in nine years⁴ – and while that startling statistic encompasses much more than distracted driving-related incidents, the NSC's survey insights include the troubling note that 47 percent of respondents feel comfortable texting either manually or through voice controls while driving.⁵

While cell phone usage is a major factor in distracted driving incidents, it is by no means the only one.

What distracts us

Distracted driving is broadly considered to be any activity that takes a driver's hands off the wheel of the vehicle, draws eyes away from the road or simply **takes the mind to another place**. Overall cognitive distraction can be a bigger risk than physical distraction alone.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) identifies these as examples of distractions⁶ that endanger driver, passenger and bystander safety:

- Texting or talking on a phone
- Eating and drinking
- Talking to passengers
- Grooming
- Reading, including maps
- Using a navigation system
- Watching a video
- Adjusting a radio, or other device

Reaching for something or swatting an insect are also common distractions. Distraction can also be several things at once. For example, "rubbernecking" as you pass a crash not only takes your eyes away from the road, but also creates mental distractions when asking yourself, "What happened?", "Were there any injuries?" and "Do I know those involved?"

Hands-free is not the solution

According to more than 30 scientific research studies and reports, using hands-free devices is not significantly different from holding a phone in terms of traffic safety,⁷ regardless of the legality of one use versus the other. Though hands-free devices may eliminate some physical distraction, they may not alleviate cognitive distraction. When a person concentrates on a conversation instead of the road, his or her driving can suffer.

What the numbers tell us

- The average person reads a text in about 4.6 seconds. At 55 mph, a car travels 80 feet every second. Reading a text while driving is like driving the length of a football field blindfolded.⁸
- At any given time during daylight hours in the U.S., upward of 660,000 drivers are using their phone or texting.⁹
- There were 3,477 fatalities in distraction-affected crashes in 2015, an 8.8 percent increase from 2014.¹⁰
- More than 2 in 3 drivers reported talking on a cell phone while driving within a one-month period and 1 in 3 say they do so regularly.¹¹
- Drivers using cell phones (handheld or hands-free) fail to see up to 50 percent of their driving environment—a phenomenon known as “inattention blindness.”¹²

Helpful Resources

National Safety Council

<http://www.nsc.org/learn/NSC-Initiatives/Pages/distracted-driving.aspx>

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

<https://www.nhtsa.gov/risky-driving/distracted-driving>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

https://www.cdc.gov/motorvehiclesafety/distracted_driving/

Occupational Safety and Health Administration

<https://www.osha.gov/distracted-driving/>

Mitigating distraction

Plan calls

Establish times when the driver can pull off the road and be available for communications (whether by text, email or telephone).

Ignore the phone

Calls cannot always be scheduled. Establish a culture where allowing callers to leave messages to be returned at the earliest convenience (i.e., when it is safe to do so) is acceptable.

Drive defensively

Defensive driving techniques can provide more time to respond to changing driving conditions.

- Pre-set temperature and radio controls.
- Clear windows of frost, ice, snow or debris before driving.
- Increase following distance (at least four seconds in normal conditions in a sedan and longer in larger vehicles or adverse conditions).¹³
- Be aware of what is occurring ahead of the vehicle (scanning 10-15 seconds ahead).¹⁴
- In inclement weather, slow down and allow for increased stopping distances and poor visibility.
- Deal with distractions in a safe location, while parked.

References

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