

Has distracted driving become an epidemic?

Risktopic – June 2013

Distracted driving is anything that takes your hands off the wheel, eyes off of the road or mind off of the driving task.

Introduction

We hear a lot today about the issue of distracted driving. However, distraction while driving is not a new issue; it's been around in some form since the invention of the windshield wipers in the early 1900's. What has changed over the years are the types and levels of distraction. Innovations such as mobile phones and other devices we use in the vehicle add a significant measure of convenience, safety and security to people's lives. The challenge is to maximize their benefits while reducing the dangerous distractions associated with their use. Unfortunately, an epidemic has spread where people are ignoring the dangers of distracting driving resulting in an estimated \$40 billion in social and economic losses annually. Current statistics show that 25% - 50% of all vehicle crashes are associated with distracted driving.¹

Discussion

Rubbernecking, adjusting the radio, attending to children, talking to a passenger, eating, drinking, using a mobile phone, and reading, are all forms of distracted driving. Simply put, distracted driving is anything that takes your hands off the wheel, eyes off of the road or mind off of the driving task. As you can see, distractions can be physical or they can be mental, which is called "cognitive."

Regardless of the reason, drivers who are distracted react more slowly to traffic conditions or events such as a car stopping to make a left turn or pulling out of a side road. A 2007 study by the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute indicates that "If a driver's eyes are away from the roadway for two seconds or more in a six-second window, their risk of being involved in a crash is two times higher than an alert driver."³

- In 2010 alone, 3092 people were killed in crashes where distracted driving was a factor. ⁽²⁾
- 18% of injury crashes in 2010 were reported as distraction-affected crashes
- 47% of all texting adults say they have sent or read a text message while driving ⁽⁵⁾
- A survey indicated that 66% of respondents would answer and continue driving after receiving a call while driving. Not only do most people tend to answer and keep driving, but close to half held the phone in their hand while driving!¹

Many states have had general distracted driving prohibitions as part of their laws for many years. If a driver was found to be distracted for any reason they could be ticketed. However, with the rapid expansion of digital devices, there are many new laws that address driver distraction. It is important to know the specific laws in the places where you will drive. Most states ban any form of texting while driving altogether, some states require mobile phones to be hands-free, and certain classes of drivers are subject to additional restrictions (such as truck, bus, young-aged drivers and even government employees and contractors).

Guidance

Probably the most important thing that you can do to combat distraction is to commit yourself to the driving task and recognize that driving requires your full attention. Make an effort to stay focused on the road and refuse to engage in behavior that is likely to distract you.

Additional suggestions to manage distractions include:

- Avoid talking on the phone while driving. If necessary, find a safe place to pull off the road to have a conversation. Some drivers will turn off their phone or switch it to silent mode before getting in the vehicle. For more tips on mobile phones and driving, please see our Risktopic on Cell Phone Usage.
- Familiarize yourself with the features of your vehicle's equipment. Especially in rental vehicles that may be different than your own.
- Preset radio and climate controls.
- Secure items that may move around while vehicle is in motion.
- Avoid smoking, eating, and drinking while driving.
- Pull safety off the road and out of traffic to deal with children.
- Do your personal grooming at home – not in the car. Shaving or applying makeup will both take your hands off the wheel and eyes off of the road.
- Do not read while driving. Review maps or program GPS devices before hitting the road.
- Ask a passenger to help you in activities that may be distracting.

Conclusion

As long as our society continues to grow and people are driving vehicles, the risk of being distracted will be an ever-present challenge. New innovations may help us to solve some problems while creating others at the same time. Understanding the risk of distracted driving and deciding to take precautionary measures to minimize distractions may help you avoid a serious injury or death. Continuously remind yourself and others when you find yourself tempted to take your hands off of the wheel, your eyes off of the road or your mind off of the driving task. Whatever is distracting you is certainly not worth risking your own life or the lives of others. Your actions and commitment can make a difference.

References

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