

Don't Drive Distracted – April Is Distracted Driving Awareness Month

Distracted driving is a serious problem, and all drivers should be aware of how distracted driving affects behavior on the road. Becoming educated about distracted driving is the first step toward making the roads safer. The second is to take action and choose to avoid driving distracted. This Distracted Driving Awareness Month, take the time to understand how you can be a better, less distracted driver and make the road a safer place.

Did you know?

- More than 3,000 people were killed in distraction-related crashes in 2012.¹
- More than 420,000 people were injured in crashes involving a distracted driver in 2012.¹
- 11% of all drivers under age 20 who were killed in fatal car accidents were reported as distracted at the time of the accident.¹
- Over 21% of all car crashes are caused by cell phone usage.²
- For drivers 15-19 years old involved in fatal crashes, 21% of the distracted drivers were distracted by the use of cell phones.³

It is easy to become complacent about distracted driving. Thousands of people drive distracted every day. These drivers could be texting, looking up directions on a smartphone app, engaging in a conversation with passengers, listening to music, eating a snack, talking on a headset, or even just changing the radio station. All of these activities may seem harmless, especially if you do them every day, but the truth is that they can be dangerous and can prevent you from being an alert, fully-aware driver.

For example, you may think that sending a very short text message has no effect on your ability to drive. In fact, sending or receiving a text takes a driver's eyes off of the road for an average of 4.6 seconds. If you are traveling 55 mph, you could travel the entire length of a football field in that short period of time.⁴ Likewise, talking on the phone impairs your cognitive and physical ability to drive more than you might think.

The sad truth is, cell phones are not the only cause of distracted driving. There are a variety of other factors that can remove a driver's attention from the road, endangering the safety of other drivers, passengers, and pedestrians.

About Distracted Driving

What Is Distracted Driving?

Distracted driving is any behavior that diverts a driver's full attention from the task of driving. These distractions come in many forms, and include, but are not limited to:

- Texting
- Talking on the phone
- Talking to passengers
- Reading a map
- Using a GPS
- Eating
- Drinking
- Grooming
- Listening to music
- Adjusting the radio, CD player, or MP3 player

Each of these activities can take your attention away from the road long enough to cause you or another person serious harm.

What Is Distracted Driving Awareness Month?

The National Safety Council has designated April "Distracted Driving Awareness Month" in order to increase drivers' awareness of the dangers of distracted driving.⁵ Distracted Driving Awareness Month is meant to encourage drivers to reexamine their driving habits, become aware of the ways in which they may be driving unsafely, and pledge to avoid driving distracted in the interest of their own safety as well as the safety of passengers and bystanders.

Distracted Driving Laws in the U.S.

There are 12 U.S. states in addition to the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands that prohibit the use of handheld cell phones while driving. The degree of severity to which these laws are applied varies from state to state. Laws may include a ban on cell phones for bus drivers, a ban on cell phones for novice drivers, a ban on texting for novice drivers, a ban on texting for all drivers, a ban on cell phone use and texting within school zones, and a ban on cell phone use and texting within construction zones, among others.

Traffic violation laws that relate to distracted driving may manifest as primary laws or secondary laws. A primary law means that if pulled over, a driver may be ticketed solely for a

specific distracted driving behavior. A secondary law says that the driver may be ticketed for a distracted driving behavior only if they have been pulled over for another violation.⁶

Understanding Distracted Driving

There are a variety of factors that can contribute to distracted driving. Here you will find the best ways to deal with them so you can eliminate distractions and focus on driving safely.

Why You Shouldn't Use Your Phone While Driving

What constitutes distracted driving while using a phone? Any interaction with a phone can be dangerous.

According to National Occupant Protection Use Surveys (NOPUS), around 660,000 drivers are operating electronic devices (including phones) at any given daylight moment.⁷ This is disturbing, given that drivers using cell phones have slower reaction times, exhibit delayed braking times, and have a harder time staying within their lanes than those who are not distracted.⁸ In fact, drivers using cell phones had even slower reaction times than drivers with a .08 blood alcohol concentration, which is the legal intoxication limit.² Furthermore, estimates indicate that drivers using cell phones fail to see up to 50% of the information in their driving environment, like red lights, pedestrians, "yield" signs, speed limits, and construction signs. This is known as "inattention blindness," and it can do real damage to a driver's ability to safely navigate the road.² An additional 2013 study from the NHTSA says that visual-manual subtasks performed on handheld phones degrade driver performance and increase the risk of a safety-critical event.⁸ These subtasks can be as simple as dialing a number, but also include navigating a contacts list, texting, or looking up a map on a smartphone.

In short, using a phone while operating a vehicle limits your ability to react to your surroundings, and to judge the safety of your actions and your environment.

Texting While Driving: A Real Danger

Text messaging while driving is deceptively engaging, and as such puts the driver at great risk. Texting requires your visual, physical, and cognitive attention, making it much more difficult to navigate safely in a vehicle. This is why drivers who type or read text messages contribute to a minimum of 100,000 motor vehicle crashes each year.⁹

Teens and Texting While Driving

The problem of texting and driving is particularly prevalent in younger demographics. Distressing statistics from the University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute (UMTRI) state that ¼ of teenagers respond to a text at least once every time they drive, and 20% of teenagers have had multi-text conversations while driving.¹ A National Highway Traffic Safety

Administration (NHTSA) study also indicates that 1 out of 5 young drivers think that texting has no effect on their driving performance.¹⁰

Adults and Texting While Driving

This problem, however, is not limited to a younger demographic. Adults are actually just as likely as teens to have texted while driving. 47% of all texting adults say they have sent or read a text message while driving,¹¹ while 10% of parents have had multi-text conversations while driving.¹

The Risks of Cell Phones and Distracted Driving

Talking on the Phone While Driving: More Dangerous Than You Might Think

It's easy to think that talking on the phone while on the road isn't a big deal, but the truth is just the opposite. Holding a conversation with someone can turn into a real distraction and take your attention away from the road. This is because conversation and driving are both thinking tasks, so they are incredibly difficult to do simultaneously. Your brain is only dedicated to one at a time, making it much harder to concentrate. Though you may think it's easy to talk and drive, you are actually giving neither activity your full attention, and are therefore posing a greater danger to others on the road as you talk and drive.

Conversations with Passengers vs. Talking on the Phone: What's the Difference?

One of the biggest distractions drivers face while on the road can actually be a friend or family member in the car. However, talking on a phone and talking to someone in the car are not the same things. Talking to people in the car is less challenging because both participants are aware of the road and traffic. Even so, the act of simultaneously conversing and driving is unsafe for all parties.

Hands-Free Does Not Mean Risk-Free

Think you're being safer by using a Bluetooth headset, speakerphone, or earbuds with a microphone to talk on the phone while you drive? According to the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute (VTTI), headset use isn't substantially safer than using a handheld phone.⁴ This is because the acts of carrying on the conversation *and* handling the phone are what make a phone conversation in the car so unsafe. The cognitive distraction is just as detrimental as the physical one. Even so, many drivers mistakenly believe talking on a hands-free cell phone is safer than handheld according to a study by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety.¹²

Distracted Driving: Not Just Cell Phones

Distracted driving is not just limited to cell phone use. Any task which takes a driver's attention away from the road is considered a distracting behavior. In the 4.6 seconds it takes to type and send a short text message, you could travel 120 yards going 55 miles per hour.⁴ These 4.6 seconds during which you are distracted from the road could be just as dangerous as reading a map, fixing your hair, talking with a friend, changing the song playing on your iPod, finding a new station on the radio, opening a can of soda, or programming your GPS. Taking your eyes and your attention from the road puts everyone in danger.

Eliminating Distracted Driving

What Can You Do to Eliminate Distracted Driving?

How can you eliminate distracted driving this April? Start by changing your own habits, then work to get the word out about distracted driving.

How to Quit Distracted Driving

In order to eliminate distracted driving, make a conscious effort to change your behavior. Alter the way you think about driving, and encourage others to do the same. To start, take a pledge, along with your friends and family, and promise to do the following:

- Never text and drive.
- Never talk on the phone and drive.
- Tell family and friends that you will not be answering your phone or texting when you drive.
- Never call or text someone when you know they will be driving.
- Never use a phone while children are in the car.
- Never eat or drink while driving.
- Look up directions before you start traveling.
- Pull over to read a map or look up directions on a GPS or smartphone.
- If something falls onto the floor while driving, pull over rather than picking it up right away.
- Know the laws in your state that pertain to distracted driving.

While implementing this pledge, remember that old habits die hard, so you'll need to make conscious choices about your behavior in the car. If you catch yourself doing one of the above, ask yourself, "Can this wait?" It is instinctive to answer your phone immediately when it rings, reach for your phone at the sound of a text message, stretch to pick up something that has fallen onto the floor, or change the radio station when a song that you don't like starts playing. The next time one of these things happens, stop and think before you act. Can you pull over and deal with this? Is it something that can wait until you arrive at your destination? Will taking this action distract you from the road in a dangerous way? If the answer is "yes," act accordingly. A missed text message is not worth a traffic ticket, a fender bender, or a car accident.

How to Spread the Word about Distracted Driving

Altering your own distracted driving habits is a crucial way to make the roads safer for yourself, other drivers, and bystanders. The second step is to get the word out about the dangers of

distracted driving and the ways people can work to change. Teens, adults, parents, teachers, and employers alike can all take action and help spread awareness about distracted driving.

Teens can...

- Take the pledge to drive phone--and distraction--free.
- Share the pledge with your friends and family and encourage them to join.
- Share information and resources about Distracted Driving Awareness Month on social media.
- Start a Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD) chapter at your school.
- Speak up when you are in the car with someone who is driving distracted. If you feel unsafe, don't be afraid to say so!

Parents can...

- Take the pledge to drive phone--and distraction--free.
- Talk seriously with your kids about distracted driving and encourage them to take the pledge as well.
- Make a family pledge form to help your family commit to driving without distractions.
- Set a good example by leaving your phone alone when driving with your kids.
- Know the laws pertaining to distracted driving in your state.

Teachers can...

- Take the pledge to drive phone--and distraction--free.
- Encourage students to take the pledge.
- Run a pledge drive.
- Give an in-class presentation about distracted driving.
- Hang posters around your school for Distracted Driving Awareness Month.

Employers can...

- Take the pledge to drive phone- and distraction-free.
- Encourage employees to take the pledge.
- Utilize the 2013 Drive Safely Work Week Toolkit from the Network of Employers for Traffic Safety (NETS).
- Enact a company policy on distracted driving.

Make a Difference during Distracted Driving Awareness Month

This April, you can work to reduce distracted driving and improve safety for everyone on the road. Make a choice to protect yourself and others by not driving distracted. You'll make the road a safer place, and you could even save a life.

Sources

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