

eSafetyLine Article

Eyes on the Road!

Sixteen percent of all traffic fatalities in 2009 were in some way distraction-related. The number of fatalities involving Blood alcohol Content above the legal limit has dropped however, the number of traffic fatalities have remained steady.

The National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) feels that this is, at least in part, because distracted driving is on the rise. This has become such an important issue that the US Department of Transportation Safety has "declared war on distracted drivers. A large part of the focus will be on weaning drivers off whatever it is that's distracting them.

To get an understanding of what distracted driving is, the most common distractions and just how widespread this phenomenon is, let's look at some frequently asked questions on the topic.

What is distracted driving?

It's defined as any non-driving activity that a person engages in that has the potential to distract him or her from the task of driving.

What is considered a distraction?

There are three main types of distractions:

- Visual- these are distractions that cause the driver to take their eyes off the road.
- Manual- this includes anything that causes the hands to be taken off of the wheel.
- Cognitive- distractions that involve taking your mind off what you're doing.

One of the most common and dangerous distractions is texting. It's so dangerous because it involves all three types of distractions. Other distractions include:

- Cell phone usage
- Eating and/or drinking
- Talking to passengers
- Grooming; combing hair, shaving, applying makeup
- Reading

- Map or GPS use
- Changing the radio station, CD or Mp3 player

Why do distractions occur?

Some of the many reasons people drive while distracted include busy lifestyles, stressful jobs, the presence of children in the car and simply because they can. With the increase of technology in smart phones and Mp3 players has come our increased reliance on these devices. Many times people forget or choose not to put them away when they should be giving driving safety their undivided attention.

How big a problem is distracted driving?

It's actually become one of the biggest dangers on US roads today. According to the NHTSA an estimated 4,000 to 8,000 crashes occur daily as a result of distracted driving.

Who are the offenders?

Everyone that drives has done so distracted at some point or another. Younger drivers are typically at greater risk, probably because they're more apt to use their cell phones, test or fiddle with the radio. But, they are definitely NOT alone!

Is using a hands-free cell phone while driving safe?

Recent research indicates that hands-free or hand-held cell phone use causes the same degree of cognitive distraction. Either way, this distraction is significant enough to negatively affect a person's driving ability, increasing their risk of an accident.

Is talking on a cell phone more dangerous than having a conversation with someone in the car?

The research done so far has been conflicted. Some findings show both activities to be equally risky, while others show that cell phone use to be more dangerous. The major difference is that a passenger is experiencing the same driving situation at the same time as the driver. This allows the passenger to pause for or alert the driver to potential hazards thus decrease the potential distraction that they may pose.

What is being done about this issue?

Since, at its core, distracted driving is a motor vehicle issue, it is being dealt with at the state level. Because the causes of distraction are so diverse, many states have decided to enact laws to address those distractions that pose the biggest dangers like cell phone use and texting.

Currently, 30 states and the District of Columbia have laws that ban texting by all drivers. Of these areas, 26 states plus the District of Columbia view driver texting as a primary offense, that is an offense that an officer may cite a driver for without any other traffic offense taking place.

When looking at cell phone use, no state bans all cell phone use (handheld and hands-free) for all drivers, but many prohibit all cell phone use by novice drivers (drivers that are either under a certain age or are a new driver). There are eight states and District of Columbia that prohibit all drivers from using handheld cell phones while driving. Since these laws vary by state, it's best to check with your state for the specific laws; a good resource for this information is www.ghsa.org.

Everyone is guilty of distracted driving to some extent. We've all had a cup of coffee for the road, had to yell at the kids for messing around in the back seat, driven home after a heated discussion with a coworker or boss or taken that phone call we've been waiting for all day. The important thing is to realize just how dangerous this behavior is and make a concerted effort to minimize how often it happens. If everyone does this, the roads will be much safer for everyone.

For additional help with safety and OSHA compliance, take advantage of the resources available through NCMA. These resources include the NCMA Block Plant Safety Software. The software is available from NCMA at (703) 713-1900 at a cost of \$150 for up to 3 plants/year (nonmember \$450).