Cell phone distracted driving: Understanding the dangers

5-MINUTE Safety Talk

Today there are more than 320 million wireless connections in the U.S. Although public opinion is turning against cell phone use while driving, many admit they regularly talk or text while driving.

Cell phone use may not be the most dangerous distraction, but because of the high crash risk and the high frequency (how often drivers are doing the behavior) and high prevalence (how many drivers are doing the behavior), the reason for putting an end to this risky behavior becomes clear.

RISK

Drivers using cell phones are four times as likely to crash, and hands-free phone use offers no safety benefit.

FREQUENCY

At any given moment, there are far more drivers using cell phones on our roadways than there are drivers distracted by other risky activities (like applying mascara or reaching into the back seat). About nine percent of all drivers are talking on cell phones at any daylight moment, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

PREVALENCE

Cell phone use while driving is widespread. More than 2 in 3 drivers report talking on their cell phone while driving, and nearly 1 in 3 said they do so fairly often or regularly according to an annual AAA Traffic Safety Foundation survey.

HANDS-FREE IS NO SAFER

Hands-free devices give drivers a false sense of security as multiple studies show they provide no safety benefit. Here's part of the reason why:

Cognitive distraction – We might think the brain "multi-tasks," but the brain actually does not process two cognitively-demanding tasks at once. Instead, the brain switches back and forth between two tasks. When a driver is talking on a cell phone, his or her brain "toggles" between the cell phone conversation and the task of driving. The brain prioritizes activities and the drive can actually become secondary.

Looking but not seeing – A cell phone distracted driver may be looking through the windshield and still miss seeing half of the roadway environment around the car. Distracted drivers experience what researchers call inattention blindness – similar to tunnel vision. Drivers look out the windshield, but their brains do not process everything necessary to drive safely. For example, cell phone distracted drivers might look directly at a red light, but that doesn't mean they actually process the need to stop.

Drivers who used their cell phones and were involved in a crash likely believed they could use their phones safely. They didn't start their call with the intention of injuring or killing another person or themselves. Don't become a statistic. Make today the day you stop using your cell phone while driving.

Stop Distracted Driving: Drive Focused and stay safe.

Driving safely requires our full attention. Make sure to constantly search the road ahead for situations and possible hazards that could require you to take quick action. Be prepared to expect the unexpected and find ways to better manage distractions that occur while driving.

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