

The Dangers of Distracted Driving

Distracted driving may be the single largest contributing factor to traffic crashes today. Although most people think of texting and handheld cell phone use as the most common distractions on the road, anything that takes the driver's attention away from the driving task is a distraction.

It's also easy to think that distracted driving is something only other people do. However, multiple surveys show that most teen drivers admit they frequently engage in distracted driving. In a survey of more than 2,000 teens 16 to 19 years old, 86% said they have driven while distracted, even while admitting that distracted driving is extremely dangerous. Teen drivers who admitted to texting while operating a vehicle sent an average of 23 text messages while driving each month. Even worse, more than a third said they nearly experienced a crash due to distracted driving.

Distracted driving is about more than texting or talking on your cell phone in the car. Nearly all distracted driving involves combinations of two or more types of distractions. An easy way to remember the three types of distractions is "eyes, hands, head."

Eyes

Visual: Taking your eyes off the road

Hands

Manual: Taking your hands off the wheel

Head

Cognitive: Taking your mind off driving

Anything that draws your attention away from the road can jeopardize your safety, your passengers' safety and that of other drivers or pedestrians on the road.

At 55 mph, in the three seconds it takes to glance at a cell phone or music device, your car will move nearly 250 feet down the road. In that length of time, another car can turn in front of you, a traffic signal can change, a pedestrian can step into the path of your vehicle – and it may be too late to avoid a potentially devastating crash.

Passengers are also a major source of distraction. In a survey of teen drivers who reported being distracted by activity inside their car before a crash, 71% of males and 47% of females said they were distracted by their passengers. A teen driver's risk of death increases by 44% when one passenger younger than 21 is in the car and no other passengers are present. The risk is doubled when there are two passengers younger than 21 and four times higher when three or more passengers under 21 are present.

To avoid distractions, follow these important guidelines:

- » Check and adjust your side and rear-view mirrors, program your GPS and buckle your seat belt before you turn the key in the ignition.
- » Reduce the volume of music on the radio so you can concentrate on the driving task and be able to hear sirens from emergency vehicles.
- » Place books, backpacks and other heavy objects on the floor to prevent them from becoming flying objects if you come to a sudden stop.
- » If you have passengers in your car, insist that they wear their seat belts and be sure to buckle yours.
- » Don't eat, apply makeup, manually adjust the seat, or text or talk on your cell phone while you are driving. All of these activities are unnecessary and unsafe actions unless they are performed when you are off the road and parked.
- » Get mentally prepared to focus on the task at hand: arriving at your destination safely.