

CELL PHONE POLICY

Q&A



BACKGROUND

The Calgary Health Region is changing its policy on the use of cellular phones while driving. Beginning January 1, 2008, all Region staff and physicians can no longer use cellular phones, PDAs, or other wireless devices while driving during their workday.

The main reason for this change is the Region's commitment to staff and community safety. It is estimated that driver distraction is responsible for up to 50 per cent of police-reported traffic collisions¹. A recent review of research shows that PDA and cell phone use are two of the top three causes of distraction².

Talking on a cell phone while driving is as dangerous as driving drunk³. A driver using a cell phone is four times more likely to be in a collision and twice as likely to rear-end another vehicle^{2,4,5}. When drivers are on the phone, they pay less attention to their surroundings, take longer to make decisions and react slower to road hazards².

Another reason for the policy change is the Region's focus on employee wellness and healthy working environments. Many busy workplaces routinely support the use of wireless devices as an effective way to manage both work and personal demands. Unfortunately, this mind-set tends to increase workload, time pressures and mental stress because colleagues, employees and clients expect more frequent contact. As a result, we are at a higher risk for burn-out and fatigue.

It is not healthy to expect colleagues, employees and physicians to cope with difficult discussions or make critical decisions while driving. Phone conversations related to Calgary Health Region work often involve complex, distressing, urgent or emotional content.

All Region staff and physicians deserve permission to focus their attention on safe driving with as little distraction as possible.

DID YOU KNOW

- 68% of Canadians and 74% of Albertans support a ban on using cell phones while driving
- Using a cell phone while driving slows down your reactions by 20%



TYPES OF DRIVER DISTRACTION

There are four different types of driver distraction: *visual, auditory, cognitive and physical.*

Visual distractions occur frequently and include reading billboards, checking a cell phone display or looking at a map.

Auditory distractions are sounds or noises such as music, conversation and traffic.

Cognitive distractions are mental activities such as daydreaming, problem solving and concentrating on conversation.

Physical distractions involve touch. They range from eating and drinking to adjusting climate controls and pushing keys on an electronic device.

When we use a cell phone or PDA, we experience all four forms of distraction².

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Does the policy only apply to the use of cell phones issued by the Region?

No. The policy applies to the use of any wireless device while you are performing work duties and driving. The policy is specific to *when* you are making phone calls rather than *how* you are making phone calls.

Does the policy apply to unpaid breaks during the work day, like my drive to and from work?

No. We strongly encourage you to avoid using wireless technology at any time while driving, but the Regional policy only applies to paid work time.

Why is the Calgary Health Region targeting the use of wireless technology when there are many other distractions that can also cause collisions?

Any distraction is dangerous. The Region strongly encourages staff and physicians to avoid other hazardous driving distractions such as using an iPod or mp3 player, smoking, reading a map, eating, drinking, and grooming.

However, as a health organization that provides cell phones and PDAs to many employees, the Region has a direct responsibility to shape a culture that promotes and supports the safe and responsible use of these devices. Other forms of driver distraction are outside the influence of an employer. We also cannot avoid or predict certain distractions, such as traffic, weather, noisy passengers and personal stress.

How is talking on a cell phone different from talking to a passenger?

Both are major distractions, but there are several reasons why talking on a cell phone is riskier than talking to a passenger⁶.

Passengers are aware of your immediate surroundings. Therefore, they can adapt the flow of conversation and offer warnings in order to prevent collisions. Callers, on the other hand, will continue to distract you during unsafe conditions because they cannot see the dangers that surround you.

When you speak with a passenger, you experience auditory and cognitive distractions as you listen, respond and concentrate on content. When you use a hands-free or hand-held cell phone, you add visual and physical distractions to locate the device, answer, dial, disconnect, look at a screen display or adjust an earpiece.

During a face-to-face conversation, you rely on many non-verbal cues to understand the other person. While talking on a cell phone, you cannot read these cues so you have to focus much more attention on the conversation than usual. This distracts you from the act of driving.

Finally, if you have a poor cellular connection, you experience more auditory and cognitive distraction than you would during a conversation with a passenger.

I use a hands-free cell phone while I drive – is this safer?

No. It's not about freeing up your hands. At best, the use of a hands-free device may reduce – not eliminate – the amount of physical distraction. Studies of cell phone use and driver reactions show that hands-free devices do not improve driving performance when compared to hand-held phones^{7,8,9}. The conversation itself is the most serious distraction whether you are holding the phone or not.

It is also important to note that hands-free devices make it much easier for drivers to engage in additional distractions such as eating, drinking, smoking, or writing down information during a phone conversation. This is much riskier than a person who is simply holding a phone while driving.

Why isn't it safe to use a cell phone while driving on quiet or rural roads?

Approximately 70 per cent of Alberta's fatal crashes occur on rural highways¹⁰. Traffic and

urban activities are not the only hazards for drivers to consider. Higher speed, wildlife, road conditions, reduced visibility, night driving and weather patterns are just as dangerous.

Drivers on quiet or rural roads may have a false sense of security that could increase their risk of collision when talking on a cell phone. The conversation is always the most dangerous distraction regardless of the surroundings where you are driving.

What if I need my cell phone for roadside safety?

It is a good safety practice to carry a cell phone with you in case of vehicle problems, traffic issues or collisions. However, if you have your phone turned on while driving it will distract you when it rings – even if you do not answer. It is safest to turn your phone off before you start driving.

How do I manage calls if I am driving for long periods of time?

Leave a voicemail message to explain you may need more time than usual to return phone calls. Pull over regularly to a safe location where you can stop your vehicle and check messages. You can then write down important information and return phone calls before continuing on your drive.

What if I need to leave my cell phone on in case someone needs to contact me in an emergency?

This is a valid concern. If you can, assign a distinct ring tone to all callers who might contact you in an emergency. Change your voicemail message to let callers know they may not reach you on the first call because you need time to drive safely out of traffic. This special ring then warns you to pay attention to the call. Emergencies create a lot of stress and distraction, so it is ideal to stop in a safe location before addressing an urgent issue.

What if I need to place an emergency call to 911?

Any situation that requires a call to 911 also involves a lot of distraction due to high levels of stress and emotion. It is especially important to stop your vehicle in a safe location before placing such a call. When possible, ask a passenger to call 911 for you.

What should I do if my colleagues are concerned about my safety when I don't answer my phone?

Let colleagues know in advance that you do not answer your phone while driving. However, when travelling in poor weather or for long periods of time, set up a system where you pull out of traffic regularly to check-in with a colleague.

How do I manage demanding colleagues or clients who cannot reach me while I am driving?

Update your voicemail message to explain you may have missed a call because you are currently driving a vehicle. When you need to travel for

a long period of time, ask a colleague if you can leave their name and number on your voicemail as an alternate contact to help callers while you are driving.

What do I do if I am expecting an important phone call while I am driving?

The safest action is to pull out of traffic and stop your vehicle before you answer the call. If possible, let important callers know in advance that you will not answer your phone while driving – but assure them you will call them back as soon as you can safely stop your vehicle.

What do I do if I am going to be late for a meeting due to weather or bad traffic?

The safest action is to pull out of traffic, stop your vehicle and place a call.

¹ Stutts, JC, Reinfurt, DW, Staplin, L, Rodgman, EA. (2001). The Role of Driver Distraction in Traffic Crashes. University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center & AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety: www.aaafoundation.org/pdf/distraction.pdf

² Young, K, Regan, M, Hammer, M. (2003). Driver Distraction: A Review of the Literature. Monash University Collision Research Centre: www.monash.edu.au/muarc/reports/muarc206.pdf

³ Strayer, DL, Drews, FA & Crouch, DJ. (2003). Fatal Distraction? A Comparison of the Cell-Phone Driver and the Drunk Driver. In McGehee, DV, Lee, JD & Rizzo, M. (Eds.) *Driving Assessment 2003: International Symposium on Human Factors in Driving Assessment, Training and Vehicle Design*. Public Policy Centre, University of Iowa.

⁴ McEvoy, SP, Stevenson, MR, McCartt, AT, Woodward, M, Haworth, C, Palamara, P & Cercarelli, R. (2005). Role of mobile phones in motor vehicle crashes resulting in hospital attendance: a case-crossover study. *British Medical Journal*, 331(7514), 428-430.

⁵ Redelmeier, DA & Tibshirani, RJ. (1997). Association between cellular-telephone calls and motor vehicle collisions. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 7(336), 453-458.

⁶ Hunton, J & Rose, JM. (2005). Cellular telephones and driving performance: the effects of attentional demands on motor vehicle crash risk. *Risk Analysis*, 25(4), 855-866.

⁷ Strayer, DL, Drews, FA & Crouch, DJ. (2006). A comparison of the cell phone driver and the drunk driver. *Human Factors*, 48(2), 381-391.

⁸ Patten, CJ, Kircher, A, Ostlund, J & Nilsson, L. (2004). Using mobile telephones: cognitive workload and attention resource allocation. *Collision Analysis and Prevention*, 36, 341-350.

⁹ Strayer, DL & Johnston, WA. (2001). Driven to distraction: Dual-task studies of simulated driving and conversing on a cellular phone. *Psychological Science*, 12, 462-466.

¹⁰ Government of Alberta Infrastructure and Transportation. (2006). *Alberta Traffic Safety Plan: Saving Lives on Alberta's Roads*: www.infratrans.gov.ab.ca/INFTRA_Content/docType48Production/trafficsafetyplan.pdf