

Cellphone use and Driving

Any activity that requires a driver to take their hands off the wheel or their eyes off the road is a distraction that sooner or later will most likely result in a collision. With the growing popularity of electronic communication devices being used by drivers, the potential for these injuries greatly increases. These injuries are not only predictable but they are very preventable.

Cellphone use continues to grow in popularity worldwide. Of concern, in recent surveys 85% of cellphone users admitted to using their phones on at least one occasion while driving.

Hundreds of recent studies have found that drivers using cellphones, whether hand-held or hands-free have a four to six times increase in the risk of collisions; are two times more likely to be involved in rear end collisions; often use brakes more intensely; run red lights; have reduced peripheral vision; have slowed reaction times and are driving in a state of “inattention blindness”.

Cellphone use, whether it is hand-held or hands-free, and driving is the equivalent to driving while impaired.

Driving is a very complicated activity that we unfortunately take for granted. Cellphone use and driving requires an individual to multi-task. Functional magnetic resonance imaging studies in humans have shown that we are not very good at multi-tasking.

The problem can be simplified into two broad categories. The first being that the distraction is really the conversation itself. Hence, the lack of difference between the use of hands-held or hands-free devices. Recently, it has been shown that the conversation with a passenger in the vehicle is actually protective. The reason being that the passenger adjusts their conversation according to the traffic density, speed, and weather conditions. The person on the other end of the line cannot do this if they are not aware of the driving conditions.

The other problem is with either reading or writing text messages when the driver's eyes are distracted from the road ahead and their hands are most likely off the wheel. Texting can distract a driver for several seconds at a time and produces a 35% reduction in reaction time.

Equally frightening is that 83% of young American drivers admitted to talking on their cellphones while driving and 68% admitted to texting while driving. It is becoming the social norm to participate in these dangerous driving distractions.

Unfortunately, policy makers have chosen to ignore the evidence and have developed laws prohibiting hand-held cellphone use while allowing hands-free devices. Research is

now showing us that jurisdictions that have done this have not seen any reductions in collisions.

Given that cellphone use and driving poses obvious risks to drivers and other road users, municipalities, states and provinces should be looking at implementing a total ban on cellphone use while driving. Public awareness campaigns need to inform the public of the dangers of using cellphones and other hands-free electronic devices while driving.

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