



# Distractions in Everyday Driving

AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety



Did you know that Americans spend about one hour and 15 minutes in their vehicles every day? Unfortunately, people often treat this as a time to multitask and take care of other daily activities, from eating dinner to returning phone calls. With today's proliferation of mobile devices, dashboard technologies, and other tools that provide easy access to information, entertainment, and communications, in-vehicle distractions are increasing – as is the temptation to give in to them. In fact, drivers spend more than half their time behind the wheel engaged in potentially distracting behaviors.

**So little time, so many multi-taskers.**

If you're driving your vehicle, you are already multitasking. At a minimum you are: operating a piece of heavy machinery at high speed; navigating across changing terrain; calculating speeds and distances; and responding to all the other drivers and obstacles around you. Putting one more activity in the mix – even talking to your passengers or changing a radio station – can be enough to make you lose control of your vehicle or fail to respond in an emergency.



participants in two states, researchers concluded that it's not only the new or high-tech gadgets that are creating the biggest distractions. Drivers today are getting distracted by many of the same things that distracted drivers 100 years ago – passengers, things that catch one's attention outside the vehicle, and objects in the vehicle that move or fall over. Activities like eating and reading are distractions just like high-tech ones, such as text messaging, emailing, or talking on a cell phone.

### **The younger the passenger, the bigger the potential distraction**

Dealing with passengers is one of the most frequently reported causes of distraction. Energetic teen passengers can be particularly distracting, especially to inexperienced, young drivers. Managing children and infants also requires special attention. Researchers report that kids are four times more distracting than adults as passengers, and infants are eight times more distracting.

### **Everyone does it – and that's not good**

A Foundation study found almost everyone reaches for something, adjusts a control, or gets distracted at some point while driving, which is one of the reasons distracted driving is such a big problem. Driver inattention is a factor in more than 1 million crashes in North America annually, resulting in serious injuries, deaths, and an economic impact that some experts say reaches nearly \$40 billion per year.

### **Most distractions are nothing new**

After reviewing crash-report data and footage from cameras mounted inside the vehicles of study



## Different distractions, same results

Quick quiz: What do eating a hamburger, getting into a discussion, and reading a GPS screen have in common? Well, if you're doing any of these things while driving, you become distracted in ways that increase your risk of crashing. In fact, distractions come in three forms: **visual, manual, and cognitive**.

- **Visual** distractions cause you to take your eyes off the road. When traveling at 65 mph, if you look at your GPS for two seconds to check where you are on the map, you'll have driven two-thirds the length of a football field before you see the road again. That gives you plenty of time and distance to get in a serious crash.
- **Manual** distractions take your hands off the wheel. When you use one – or even both – of your hands to get that hamburger under control, you risk losing control over something much more important – your vehicle. You also are greatly slowing your ability to respond to changing or unexpected conditions that can occur without warning.
- **Cognitive** distractions take your mind off the task at hand. Recent AAA Foundation research has found that even when drivers keep their eyes on the road

and their hands on the wheel, engaging in mentally-distracting tasks (such as talking on a hands-free phone or using a speech-to-text email system) can lead to slowed reaction time, missed visual cues, tunnel vision, and even suppressed activity in the areas of the brain needed for safe driving. In short: "hands-free" doesn't mean "risk-free!"

## What about texting?

With more and more states banning handheld phone usage and texting while driving, and new technologies being developed to lock keypads and block other functionality of mobile devices when you're behind the wheel, you may be thinking that there's a big fuss being made about texting. And you're right, because texting while driving combines all three types of these distractions. When your eyes are reading the screen, your fingers are typing on the keypad, and your mind is busy crafting a message, you're not paying attention to driving and you're more likely to crash – up to 23 times more likely, in fact. But remember – although texting while driving is extremely dangerous, it's by no means the only activity that combines all three potentially lethal types of distraction, and just because something may not be illegal doesn't mean it's safe.



# Be aware that distraction is a problem that affects YOU.

The AAA Foundation's sixth annual Traffic Safety Culture Index found that nearly 90 percent of motorists rated drivers talking on cell phones as a somewhat or very serious threat to their personal safety, and over 95 percent felt this way about drivers texting or emailing. Yet more than 2/3 of respondents also admitted to talking on a cell phone while driving in the past month, more than 1/3 admitted to reading a text or email in that time, and more than 1/4 admitted to typing or sending a text message or email while driving.

## ★ Don't touch that dial.

Adjust seat positions, climate controls, sound systems, and other devices before you leave or while the vehicle is stopped. Know how your controls work, so if you must adjust something on the fly, you'll be less distracted. Use presets for radio and climate control, or have your passenger assist you.

## ★ Stop to eat or drink.

Drive-through windows and giant cup holders make it tempting to have a meal while driving, but you're safer when you stop to eat or drink. Reducing your risk will be worth the time you spend.

## ★ Pull over to a safe place to talk on the phone, or send text messages or emails.

Cell phones can be a great resource for getting help or reporting trouble. But, whether you use a handheld phone or a hands-free device, talking while driving causes you to take your mind off the task at hand (and sometimes your eyes and hands, too). Your best bet is to pull off the road to a safe spot before you use your phone to talk, text, or surf the web. Be careful, because stopping on the road can be very dangerous. Find a safe area away from traffic. Learn how your phone's controls work in case an emergency call while driving is unavoidable. And practice good



habits: Turn your phone off before you drive, so you won't be tempted to answer calls on the road.

## ★ Plan ahead.

Check directions and traffic conditions before you leave, so you'll be prepared for your journey. If you have a GPS, enter your destination information before departing, and pull over to a safe place if you need to make changes or review maps or route guidance. If possible, use a passenger as your navigator and assistant.

## ★ Don't multitask and drive.

Driving is complicated enough -- you'll become distracted if you do other things, too. Don't use the vehicle's mirrors for personal grooming when the vehicle is in motion. Don't try to read or write while you're behind the wheel. Just drive.

## ★ Pull over to care for children.

Change the baby, feed the kids, and buckle them into their vehicle seats before you leave. If you need to attend to them, pull over in a safe place -- don't try to handle children while you're driving.

★ **Help teens identify and reduce distractions.**

New drivers face a big challenge behind the wheel; in fact, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety reports that for every mile they drive, teens are four times more likely to be involved in a crash than other drivers. Additionally, crash risk increases with the number of passengers.

Parents must model safe driving behaviors, and can teach teens to limit distractions and focus on the road.



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