
Distracted Driving. Hands-Free Is No Solution!

... the final word on cell phone use while driving

The National Safety Council (NSC) recently published a white paper on this subject titled "Understanding the Distracted Brain." This white paper does an excellent job of capturing the key findings of 33 studies comparing the risks of hands-free and handheld cell phones in use while driving. This represents the compilation of a huge amount of research which, in effect, represents the leading edge of knowledge on the subject. The following are some key points from this white paper:

Inattention Blindness

Vision is our single most important sense for safe driving. Cell phone use while driving introduces a cognitive distraction which is the same whether we are using a hands-free or handheld device. Inattention blindness is similar to tunnel vision. Drivers using phones have a tendency to "look at" but not "see" objects. Estimates indicate they fail to see up to 50% of the information available.

For example, a driver ran a red light while talking on a cell phone hitting another vehicle crossing with a green light. The vehicle hit was not the first car through the intersection, it was the third or fourth. The driver never hit the brakes and was traveling at 48 mph when the other vehicle was struck, resulting in the death of a 12 year old. Witnesses told investigators that the driver was not looking down but was observed looking straight through the windshield talking on the phone as he sped past four cars and a school bus stopped in the other lane.

Hands-Free = Safe Solution Myth

Many drivers mistakenly believe talking on a hands-free cell phone is safer than handheld. Hands-free devices do not eliminate cognitive distraction. Researchers have not been able to find a safety benefit to hands-free phone conversations. This conclusion is supported by 30 research studies and reports by scientists around the world. We may be "hands-free" but we are not "brain-free" when talking on such devices.

The Risk and Possible Solutions

Your risk of a crash is increased by four times if you are using a cell phone. That risk does not change with the use of hands-free devices. Although public perception of this risk is high, most drivers do not take it very seriously. People tend to believe they are more skilled than other drivers at dealing with the risk.

Prevention of cell phone use while driving is difficult because of competing factors including:

- Drivers' desire to be connected and productive
- Drivers' desire for social interaction
- Boredom while driving

Solutions are very difficult. To date, efforts have mostly been related to public laws and corporate policies. Compliance is largely voluntary as enforcement is a challenge. A very interesting possible future solution is cell phone technology that can prevent calls and messages from being sent or received by drivers in moving vehicles.

Meanwhile, the best solution is to educate drivers of the risks and to encourage the use of common sense. The very best solution is to simply refuse to use your cell phone while driving. As it is very tempting to answer an incoming call (or, at least to check the identity of the caller) while driving, the BEST BET is to turn off or silence your phone before you start driving your vehicle. Let voice mail take messages for you. Check for messages and place any necessary calls before you start driving or after you have safely stopped at the end of a trip. Your quality of life is not worth risking for any phone call or text message.

Further Assistance

As always, we at Scott Risk Performance are available to help you as needed with this and other risk performance issues. Call on us if we may be of assistance. Also, let us know if you would like to receive a copy of the full NSC white paper referenced in this bulletin.

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