



Distractions in Everyday Driving

AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety



These days, people are bombarded with devices that can help accomplish more in less time. With people spending an average of about one hour and 15 minutes in their vehicles every day, unfortunately, other activities – from talking to the kids to eating dinner – often take place behind the wheel. Experts estimate that drivers are doing something potentially distracting more than 15 percent of the time their vehicles are in motion.

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, smoking, and reading are distractions just like high-tech ones, such as text messaging, emailing, or using 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 eight times more distracting.

Everyone does it – and that's not good

An AAA 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 changing a CD have in common? Well, if you're doing any of the three while driving, you become distracted in ways that can take your focus away from driving. That's because distractions come in a variety of forms: physical, mental, and combined.

- Physical distractions cause you to take your eyes off the road or your hands off the controls. For instance, when you're eating a hamburger as you drive, you may glance down to unwrap it, and even block part of your field of vision as you eat it. Each of these actions distracts you, slows your ability to respond to changing conditions, and diminishes your control over the vehicle.

- Mental distractions take your mind off the job of driving. When you get into a discussion – whether it's with a passenger, over a hands-free device, or a handheld cell phone – your mind can become absorbed more with the discussion than with driving. Sometimes you don't even need another person to create a mental distraction – if you're upset or thinking about that big meeting with the boss as

you're driving home, your body may be behind the wheel, but your head's back at the office. So, give yourself a break: Focus on driving and leave the other stresses behind.

- Combination distractions have both physical and mental elements. Think about what happens when you do something as seemingly simple as changing a CD while you're driving: You have to get the right CD in your hand, get it out of the case, glance down to flip the right side up, look over again to get it into the right slot, and press play. As you do all that, your eyes leave the road, your hands leave the controls, and your mind must coordinate all the action. For the time it takes to do all that, your vehicle is on "auto-pilot" – minus the pilot!!

What about cell phones?

We've all experienced it: The guy next to you is yelling into his cell phone, irritating everyone around him. It's so annoying, many people think it must be distracting, too – and they're right. If you are involved in a conversation, whether using a handheld phone or a hands-free device, you're risking a mental distraction that can take your attention away from driving.



Be aware that distraction is a problem that affects YOU.

The AAA Foundation's first annual Traffic Safety Culture Index found that 82 percent of motorists rated distracted driving as a serious problem, yet over half of those same individuals admitted to talking on the cell phone while driving in the past month, and 14 percent even admitted to reading or sending text messages while driving. Think about the things that distract you. Do you do things while you're driving that you wouldn't want other drivers to do?

★ 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. If you can't avoid eating while driving, at least steer clear of messy foods. Reducing your risk will be worth the time you spend. Same goes for smoking.

★ Pull over to a safe place to talk on the phone, text message or email.

Cell phones can be a great resource for getting help or reporting trouble. But, whether you use a handheld phone – which can sometimes cause a physical distraction – or a hands-free device, talking while driving causes you to take your mind off the road. Your best bet is to pull off the road to a safe spot before you use your phone to talk, text message, 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 a 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.

Read maps and check traffic conditions before you leave, so you'll be prepared for your journey. Use a passenger as your navigator and assistant, if possible. If you have a navigation system, enter your destination before departing for that destination.

★ 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 can teach teens to limit distractions, focus on the road, and most importantly model safe behavior behind the wheel. Set a good example for your teens by always buckling up and avoiding distractions in your own driving. In all cases, keep your eyes on the road and your mind on the task at hand.



For every
mile they
drive, teens
are four times
more likely
to be involved
in a crash.



AAA Foundation.org | 202-638-5944