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Distracted Driving

In today’s world, technology feeds our perceived need to multi-task — televisions let you browse the Internet, smartphone advertising stresses the ability to connect to the Web while you are talking on the phone and more.

While multi-tasking is often viewed as a valued skill, most research shows that it’s not possible to do two tasks well at the same time, especially those that use different parts of the brain. One area where multi-tasking is universally discouraged is behind the wheel of an automobile.



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Distractions while driving fall into one (or more) of three major categories:

- Visual: taking your eyes off the road
- Manual: taking your hands off the wheel
- Cognitive: taking your mind off what you are doing

Although there are many types of activities that routinely take place while we are driving, most of the focus related to distracted-driving has been on smartphones. Operating a smartphone can (and usually does) include all three of the above categories.



The Research

A study by the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute showed that nearly 80% of crashes and 65% of near-crashes involved driver inattention within three seconds of an event. The most dangerous activities (and how much more likely you are to be in a crash while performing them) are:

- Talking or listening on a hand-held device: 1.3 times
- Reading: 3 times
- Applying makeup: 3 times
- Dialing a hand-held device: nearly 3 times
- Looking at an external object: 3.7 times
- Driving with blood alcohol content 0.08% - 0.99%: 6.25 times
- Reaching for a moving object: 9 times
- Text messaging: 23.2 times (this means your eyes are off the road for 4.6 seconds, which at 55 mph is equivalent to driving the length of a football field)

The National Occupant Protection Use Survey (NOPUS) found that the percentage of drivers text-messaging or visibly manipulating handheld devices increased from 0.9% to 1.3% in 2011 and 5% of drivers reported using their cell phones while driving.

Engaging in these activities while driving can have deadly consequences. In 2014, 3,179 people were killed and 431,000 were injured in motor vehicle crashes involving distracted drivers.

What Steps Are Currently Being Taken

On Sept. 30, 2009, President Obama signed an executive order banning federal employees from texting while driving government vehicles, while driving their own vehicle using government-provided electronic equipment or while driving privately owned vehicles on government business. The order also encourages federal contractors to develop their own policies banning texting and driving.



Thirty-nine states, including United Heartland's core states of Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and Wisconsin have a ban on texting. Most include provisions that prohibit cell phone use for novice drivers and/or bus drivers.

In April 2013, voluntary guidelines were released to automobile manufacturers on limiting the distraction risk incorporated into vehicle design. The Department of Transportation has also banned the use of texting and hand-held cell phone use for all commercial drivers, subject to a \$15,000 penalty. The FAA has also advised air carriers to create and enforce policies that limit distractions in the cockpit.

Traffic crashes are also the leading cause of death for teenagers, with 40% of all teens saying they have been in a vehicle when the driver used a cell phone in a way that put people in danger. They are also the most likely to text while driving. If you employ teenage staff, be sure they understand the impact of distracted driving.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration has taken on the subject by introducing a website for the topic. It includes sample programs and policies (also available from your United Heartland Loss Control Representative). On the site, Assistant Secretary of Labor Dr. David Michaels says:

"To combat the threat of distracted driving, we are prepared to act quickly. When OSHA receives a credible complaint that an employer requires texting while driving or who organizes work so that texting is a practical necessity, we will investigate and where necessary issue citations and penalties to end this practice."

As an employer, it is not just enough to have a policy that says employees must comply with state laws, because although many states have instituted laws, not all have. With the amount of information out there, there is an assumption of awareness of the hazards of texting and driving — policies need to reflect this same information.

Want to Know More?

For more information, visit the U.S. government website for distracted driving, Distraction.gov or contact your Loss Control representative today.



Tips for Positively Impacting Distracted Driving

As an employer, it is important you send a clear message that you do not condone nor require texting while driving.

- Review your work procedures — is there an expectation or perception that in order to get the job done, an electronic device has to be used while driving?
- Set up clear procedures and expectations for safe use of texting and other communication for everyone in your organization.
- Incorporate information about safe ways to communicate into employee orientation and training.
- Eliminate any financial incentives that directly or inadvertently encourage/require texting while driving.

No matter how well someone drives, texting while driving impacts everyone's driving ability.

- If you must talk on the phone, use hands-free dialing, or better yet, pull off the road in a safe area to make or take a call.
- Take a pledge to not text while driving.
- Speak up if the driver in your car is distracted.
- Encourage your family and friends to turn off the phone before they start a vehicle.

As a distracted driver, not only do you potentially impact those in your vehicle, you impact those in surrounding vehicles. Consider the increased risk of distracted driving — is it worth risking your life and the lives of those around you to respond to the latest message?