

## Distracted driving: Stay focused when on the road

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

It's 8 a.m., and you jump in your car to drive to work. You have every intention of driving safely, but within minutes of merging onto the highway you've already checked your makeup in the mirror, fiddled with your car's radio, programmed your GPS for a meeting location, made two calls on your cellphone and sent a text message to your sister.

You might not realize it, but you're a distracted driver.

Each time you take your focus off the road, even if just for a split second, you're putting your life and the lives of others in danger. An emerging and deadly epidemic on the nation's roads, distracted driving-related crashes caused at least 5,500 deaths and nearly 450,000 injuries in 2009, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation. However, since many local law enforcement agencies don't routinely document distraction



factors in crash reports, federal safety officials believe the numbers are actually much higher.

"Driving a car is a very complex task," says Barbara Harsha, executive director of the Governors Highway Safety Association, which estimates that distractions are associated with 15 percent to 25 percent of crashes at all levels. "It requires your complete attention. All it takes is a glance away for more than two seconds and you can get into serious trouble."

Distracted driving is any activity that takes your attention away from the road. In everyday driving, however, distractions are common. From talking with passengers, to eating, to turning around to check on fidgety toddlers, distracted driving endangers you, your passengers, pedestrians and others. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention describes three main types of distractions while driving. Visual distractions cause you to take your eyes off the road, manual distractions cause you to take your hands off the wheel and cognitive distractions, such as listening to a talk

radio show, cause you to take your mind off what you are doing. Driving is a great privilege, but with that privilege also comes responsibility.

### Manage your distractions

The good news is that distracted driving crashes can be prevented.

"The first thing I would tell you is to put your electronic device away," Harsha says. "Just don't use it. All it takes is a glance that's longer than two seconds for you to get into a crash."

Some distractions can't be eliminated, but most can be managed. For example, turn your cellphone off or silence it before you start the engine. Secure your pets properly before you begin to drive. Don't eat or drink on the road. Set your GPS before starting the engine.

In a national survey from the National Highway Traffic Safety



Spend your time at the wheel focused on the road, not on distractions like phones, food or friends.

>> For more tips on distraction-free driving, visit [www.distraction.gov](http://www.distraction.gov).

Administration, most respondents said there are few driving situations when they would not use the phone or text, yet they reported feeling unsafe when in vehicles in which the driver is texting. They also said they support bans on texting and cellphone use while driving.

### Distractions and teens

Traffic crashes are the leading cause of death for U.S. teens. Teens are especially vulnerable to distractions while driving and are more likely than other age groups to be involved in a fatal crash where distraction is reported.

Teen drivers are far more likely to send and receive text messages while driving than adults. Also, a teen's crash risk goes up when there are teen passengers in the car. Parents need to take a strong stand with their teens, Harsha says. Prohibit teens from using electronic devices while driving and restrict them from carrying teenage passengers.

"Teenagers get into the most crashes the first six months after they have gotten their license, so it's important that they focus on driving and not get distracted by electronic devices," Harsha says.



### A new distraction: Texting while driving

While driver distractions come in many forms, texting while driving is especially dangerous.

"It seems so common sense not to text while driving, but people are so connected to their electronic devices that they kind of forget themselves," Harsha says.

According to research from the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute, texting while driving is associated with the highest risk of all cellphone-related tasks.

The research found that text messaging causes drivers to take their eyes off the road for 4.6 seconds over a six-second interval. That means at 55 miles per hour, a texting driver would travel the length of a football field without looking at the road.



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