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Get Real Behind the Wheel

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) blames inattentive or distracted drivers for up to 30 percent of motor vehicle crashes -- an estimated 1.2 million a year.

In a study by the University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center (HSRC), drivers knew they were being watched. Yet 15 percent drove distracted.

The study found that drivers were most often distracted by something outside their vehicle, followed by adjusting a radio or CD player, according to the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, which funded the study. Other distractions included talking with other people in the car, adjusting heating or air conditioning controls, eating or drinking, using a cell phone and smoking.



Different age groups seemed to be distracted by different things, the study said. Drivers under 20 were most often distracted by tuning the radio or changing CDs; young adults were most often distracted by other passengers; older drivers (older than 65) were most often distracted by objects or events happening outside the vehicle.

"We want people to see driving as the number one task and try to minimize all other activities," says Scott Osberg, Ph.D., director of research for the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety. "Driving is no time to be multitasking."

What to do

OK, you've been told since you began driving to keep your eyes on the road and your hands on the wheel. But what should and shouldn't you do?

For one thing, don't use a cell phone while driving. Cell phones that make you punch in the numbers and functions are bad enough. But even with supposedly safer, hands-free, speech-activated models, "there has been research showing that the biggest problem is cognitive distraction," says Jane Stutts, Ph.D., HSRC's manager of epidemiological studies and coauthor of its distracted driving study. "People talking on the phone... are not aware of cars and what's going on around them."

The right way: Make the call before you begin driving or after you pull off in a safe place, she says.

It's the same with chatty passengers or cranky kids. Don't get so caught up that you lose track of what you're doing. Rather than turning around to calm or discipline the little ones, Dr. Osberg says, "Pull over if it's serious and they persist."

Some objects in a car have become more complex, so they're more distracting. Car radios were once fairly simple. "Now," Dr. Stutts says, "it's 15 buttons and scans and seeks and CDs."

Our eating habits have changed, too. "The sheer number of drive-through restaurants means people are doing more eating and drinking in cars," Dr. Stutts says. Adds Dr. Osberg: "A pretzel in the car is OK. A bowl of soup is not the best idea."

Smoking, primping, reading, writing, rubbernecking -- even new navigation systems that make you look down at the screen -- can all distract you. "Anytime you look away from the road, it is a danger," Dr. Osberg says.

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