

Hands-free or Hand-held? Is There a Difference?

Key Points

- Driving while talking on a cell phone is equivalent to driving with a 0.08 blood alcohol level.
- Engaging in a conversation with any type of cell phone inhibits the brain's ability to focus on driving.
- It is no safer to accept a cell phone call while driving than it is to place one.



Source: www.sxc.hu

A recent study by the National Safety Council's Journal of Safety Research found little difference in the level of distraction caused by hands-free or hand-held cell phone use. In fact, their study confirms that engaging in a conversation with any type of cell phone inhibits the brain's ability to focus on driving. The study shows that drivers tend to make more errors, cause more accidents, and drive more slowly when talking on a cell phone. In the United States, drivers talking on cell phones cause over 636,000 crashes, 12,000 serious injuries, and 2,600 deaths each year[1].

Prompted by their findings, in January 2009, the National Safety Council (NSC) became the first national organization to call for a total ban on cell phones while driving. Key conclusions of the study include the following:

- The risk of a collision quadruples when a driver uses a cell phone while driving—equivalent to driving with a 0.08 blood alcohol level.
- Hands-free equipment provides no protection against this increased risk.
- Talking on the phone while driving interferes with a driver's ability to recognize a driving hazard, assess a driving hazard, react in a safe and timely manner, and make safe driving decisions.

Currently, six states—California, Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, and Washington—the District of Columbia, and the Virgin Islands prohibit all drivers from using hand-held cell phones while driving, and 21 states and the District of Columbia ban all cell phone use by drivers under the age of 18[2].

Inattention Blindness

Talking on a cell phone while driving leads to inattention blindness—the inability to recognize objects encountered in the driver's visual field. Moreover, it is no safer to accept a cell phone call while driving than it is to place one. Taking your eyes off the road for three or more seconds to place a call (on a hand-held cell phone) is equivalent to missing at least nine action requests. It is not just the act of placing a call that is dangerous; it is the mental distraction of the conversation.

Signs of distracted driving:

- Not remembering the last few miles driven
- Tailgating
- Slamming on the brakes to avoid a collision
- Running a red light or stop sign

Safe Driving Tips:

- Let incoming calls go straight to voice mail. Check messages and missed calls after you have stopped and parked in a safe location.
- Do not take notes or look up phone numbers while driving.
- Do not engage in emotionally-charged conversations while driving, they are dangerous and distracting when you are behind the wheel.

Sources:

[1] National Safety Council, "New Study in NSC Journal Shows Hands-Free Phones No Safer Than Hand-Held Phones", July,2009, http://www.nsc.org/news/handsfree_vs_handheld.aspx.

[2] The Governors Highway Safety Association, "Cell Phone Driving Laws", December, 2009, http://www.ghsa.org/html/stateinfo/laws/cellphone_laws.html.

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