

Tips on Limiting Behind-the-Wheel Distractions

Of the millions of things vying for our attention every minute there are but few that we actually recognize and only one with which we can adequately deal at a time. Driving is an action that requires our undivided focus at all times, and any slight distractions can carry tremendous potential risks. AIADA has compiled the following tips to be used as a guide to inform you of the potential risks involved when driving distracted as well as some helpful pointers on ways to reduce the amount of distractions you face when behind the wheel.

Driving distracted

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has defined a distracted driver as follows: A distraction occurs when a driver “is delayed in the recognition of information needed to safely accomplish the driving task because some event, activity, object, or person within or outside the vehicle compels or induces the driver, shifting attention away from the driving task.”

To what extent are distractions a problem on the roadway?

NHTSA estimates that 25 percent of the 6.3 million automobile crashes reported each year involve some form of driver distraction. In addition, the Department of Transportation estimates that 6.5 percent of all crash fatalities in 2002 were the result of distracted drivers. However, auto safety analysts are not quick to make strict determinations on the issue of driving distractions. The Governors Highway Safety Association (GHSA) insists that part of the challenge of reducing driving distractions is in determining the scope of the problem. GHSA, NHTSA and other federal auto safety agencies have recommend that states now track whether or not driver distractions played a part in crashes as they collect crash-site statistics.

Most Common Distracters

- In the summer of 2003, the American Automobile Association (AAA) and its Foundation for Traffic Safety released results of the University of North Carolina’s Highway Safety Research, which analyzed five years of NASS Crashworthiness Data System (CDS) data from 5,000 reported crashes, as well as two years of narrative analysis for both CDS and North Carolina data. The study suggests that reading and writing, eating, adjusting the radio, interacting with others in the car, grooming, and cell phone use, were among major driver distractions. Results from the study indicated that 90 percent of drivers in the study were distracted from something outside the car, while 100 percent were distracted from things inside the car.
- In 2002, after conducting research on more than 2,700 Virginia crash scenes involving distracted drivers and nearly 4,500 drivers, the Virginia Commonwealth University found that “rubbernecking” – the act of looking away from the road in order to view a crash, vehicle, roadside incident or traffic – driver fatigue and looking at scenery were among the leading causes of distraction-related traffic accidents. Below is a list of VCU’s “Top 15 Causes of Distracted Driving” for the state of Virginia:

Type of Distraction	% of Crashes Caused
1. Looking at crash, vehicle, roadside incident or traffic	16
2. Driver fatigue	12
3. Looking at scenery or landmarks	10
4. Passenger or child distraction	9
5. Adjusting radio or changing CD or tape	7
6. Cell phone	5
7. Eyes not on road	4.5

8. Not paying attention, day dreaming	4
9. Eating or drinking	4
10. Adjusting vehicle controls	4
11. Weather conditions	2
12. Unknown	2
13. Insect, animal or object entering or striking vehicle	2
14. Document, book, map, directions or newspaper	2
15. Medical or emotional impairment	2

Courtesy of VCU

According to the Virginia DMV, driver distractions account for approximately 13 percent of all traffic crashes in the state of Virginia.

Awareness of Distracters

Whether you realize it or not, chances are that when you get behind the wheel you are distracted at one point or another. Scores of drivers conduct business while on the road, but it is necessary to remember that by failing to focus 100 percent of your attention on driving the risk of jeopardizing your safety is potentially increased. Recognizing the numerous distractions present in any given driving situation before heading out is important in order to plan for your safety while driving. Once you have identified potential distracters within the car, it will be easier to plan for reducing the risk of becoming distracted behind-the-wheel.

Distracted Driver Laws

Some states have begun cracking down on driver distractions. For example, New Hampshire has a comprehensive distracted driving law, and a number of states, including the District of Columbia, impose fines ranging from \$50 to \$500 on motorists caught using cell phones without a hands-free device. For the most up-to-date information on state distracted driving laws, visit AAA's website at www.aaa.com. For current state legislation regulating drivers' cell phone use, visit the GHSA website at www.naghsr.org.

Focusing on limiting distracters

A recent simulation study conducted by Plantronics, world leader in communications headsets, measured the physical impairments of drivers who use cell phones and found that driver reaction time, accuracy, and consistency of speed improved significantly when a headset was used with the phone. According to the Plantronics report, 71 percent of test subjects steered with more accuracy when using a headset as opposed to no headset, 100 percent of test subjects had faster brake reaction times, and 92 percent maintained a more consistent speed.

Cell phone headsets are just one of the many gadgets available on the market as a way of limiting distractions behind-the-wheel. Advances like voice commands, steering-wheel mounted controls and lane-changing alerts are additional ways of guarding for your safety on the road.

Honda recently announced the development of its new "Intelligent Night Vision System," which uses "far infra-red" cameras fitted on to cars in order to improve a driver's ability to detect on-coming pedestrians and avoid accidents. Using two cameras positioned on the front bumper, Honda's new system is able to detect the position and movement of infra-red heat-emitting objects, such as people. It also is able to determine whether the objects are in or approaching the vehicle's path. The system then warns drivers using onscreen and audible alarms when pedestrians are present in the road or if they are about to cross the vehicle's path.

Driver Resources

For drivers who absolutely must conduct business while driving, there are steps that can be taken

to help minimize distractions. Most auto dealerships offer solutions such as hands-free cell phone kits that can help reduce some of the potential risks involved in operating a cell phone while driving.