
AG SAFETY S.T.A.T. - SAFE TACTICS FOR AG TODAY

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NATIONAL SAFETY MONTH- SPECIAL BULLETIN THOUGHTS from the EDITOR for WEEK 4 SPECIAL ARTICLE: DISTRACTED DRIVING

THOUGHTS from the EDITOR for WEEK 4

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Each June, the National Safety Council encourages citizens to get involved and participate in National Safety Month. During each week of June, a special safety message will be shared. Week 4's message affects everyone as we try to multi-task our way through life. However, behind the wheel... let's keep our thoughts, minds, and hands on the road ahead.

For more information about this topic, including posters, crossword puzzles, and tip sheets - go to: http://www.nsc.org/NSC_EVENTS/NAT_SAFE_MONTH/Pages/Week4.aspx

"Hey, let's be careful out there," a memorable quote from Sergeant Phil Esterhaus from Hill Street Blues (1981).

DISTRACTED DRIVING

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The Problem

Many modern Americans like to think of themselves as multitaskers. Activities such as typing e-mail while watching a TV show in the other room, conversing with a friend while shopping at the store, are typical examples. We tend to see this as a way make more efficient use of our time. However, there is one place where trying to do two (or more!) things at the same time can have disastrous consequences, and that is behind the wheel of a car. Any time a person drives a motor vehicle and engages in any activity that takes attention away from the job of driving the vehicle is considered distracted driving. There are three main types of distraction recognized by the U.S. Department of Transportation:

- 1. Visual Distraction taking your eyes off the road
- 2. Manual taking you hands of the steering wheel
- 3. Cognitive taking your mind and attention away from driving

These classifications are not mutually exclusive, and any one activity (say, reaching for something, or speaking to a passenger) can involve all three at the same time. The growing role of driver distraction in roadway accidents is now a central concern.

In 2008, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), there were 5,870 fatalities and an estimated 515,000 injuries from crashes in which at least one type of distraction was mentioned on the police report. It is assumed that these numbers are lower than the actual number of incidents, as not every accident is reported.

For the same year in the state of Ohio, there were 270,389 reported crashes, of which 9,976 were attributed to "Driver Inattention." Twenty of those crashes were fatal. (Ohio Department of Public Safety Crash Reports). (It should be noted that the classification "Driver Inattention" includes all types of distracted driving, and that ODPS is working on refining this category into types and particular causes of distraction for future statistics.)

How are the effects of distracted driving measured? The information gleaned from accident reports is one indicator. But to more fully understand how different types of distractions affect drivers, researchers rely on two basic forms of research:

A simulation study takes place in a controlled laboratory environment, with test subjects seated in a driving simulator. A variety of assigned distractions (changing a CD, phone use) and the real-time responses to those distractions are tracked, measured, and analyzed.

However, recent advancements in technology that allow the placement of digital cameras and other complex sensory instrumentation such as GPS and radar connected to remote computers have resulted in the advent of naturalistic studies. These types of studies have several advantages. Drivers can be observed and their activities measured in their own cars under natural situations and in real-time. Unlike controlled laboratory conditions, these studies have no observers present to influence the driver decision-making process. In addition, the driving conditions are not static - changes in weather, road conditions, and traffic patterns can change. Results from these studies can paint a more accurate picture of what happens when a driver takes attention away from the road.

In 2006, The Virginia Tech Transportation Institute conducted the first long-range naturalistic study of driver distraction. It was conducted over a two-year period and monitored the behavior of 241 drivers over 43,000 hours of driving over 2 million vehicle miles. It included both cars and trucks. Several follow-up studies, and 6 million vehicle miles later, the results from this on-going project have shaped the realization that the issue of distracted driving is a major contributor to roadway crashes.

The latest summary of results published in 2009 was clear: Distracted driving was responsible for 80% of all accidents occurring in subject vehicles, and the primary source of driver inattention was use of a wireless device. (Virginia Tech/NHTSA). And the National Safety Council estimates that 28% of crashes in 2008 were due to handheld and hands-free cell phone use and texting.

The population with the highest proportion of distracted drivers is the under-20 age group. This is also the population that is considered the most "wired" - communication by cell-phone, and texting in particular, are the norm. Self-reporting from drivers in this cohort has numbers anywhere from 10 - 40% admitting to using a cell phone to talk and to text while behind the wheel. The National Safety Council and the NHTSA estimate this number to be closer to 50-60%.

VTTI also concluded the following:

- While driving a car dialing a cell phone made the risk of crash or near-crash event 2.8 times as high as non-distracted driving.
- Talking or listening to a cell phone made the risk of crash or near-crash event 1.3 times as high as non-distracted driving.
- Reaching for an object such as an electronic device made the risk of crash or near-crash event 1.4 times as high as non-distracted driving.

For heavy vehicles or trucks

- Dialing a cell phone made the risk of crash or near-crash event 5.9 times as high as non-distracted driving.
- Talking or listening to a cell phone made the risk of crash or near-crash event 1.0 times as high as non-distracted driving.
- Use of, or reach for, an electronic device made the risk of crash or near-crash event 6.7 times as high as non-distracted driving.
- Text messaging made the risk of crash or near-crash event 23.2 times as high as non-distracted driving.

In other words, driving is a visual task that requires an individual's undivided attention. Any activity that compromises that significantly compromises safety.

The Solution

The combination of crash statistics and long-range studies has resulted in a consensus that something should be done. Surveys conducted by the wireless industry, insurance groups and safety researchers all point to broad support of some type of ban - either on cell-phone usage or texting, or both. The general public obviously recognizes the problem. While no statewide ban on cell-phone usage while driving exists in Ohio, the state does allow localities to create and enforce their own laws. To date, in Brooklyn, Walton Hills and North Olmstead Ohio, it is illegal to talk on a cell-phone while driving.

In Columbus, a texting ban took effect in May of this year. If caught texting behind the wheel, even at a stoplight, a driver can be fined \$150. As a primary offense, law enforcement can pull a driver over if there is suspicion of texting. Cleveland has a similar text-messaging ban. A similar text-messaging bill has passed the Ohio House of representatives and is now being considered in the Senate. Supporters of such a state law say it is needed to save lives. Detractors say that banning such activities is too harsh, and that enforcement is too difficult and too time-consuming.

The ideal and most far-reaching solution is a change in behavior, not just in younger drivers, but also in all drivers. Make the decision that getting behind the wheel means to drive- not to eat or text or call a friend- but to drive. There have been many stories, from Ohio and around the country, of loved ones lost or injured because of a driver's failure to keep eyes, hands, and attention on the most important task in our multi-tasking society - arriving at a destination safely.

Ag Safety S.T.A.T. - Safe Tactics for Ag Today is an e-mail newsletter prepared by Dee Jepsen, Extension Agricultural Safety Specialist and team members from the State Safety Office, in the Department of Food, Agricultural and Biological Engineering at OSU. The primary goal of this monthly newsletter is to help you stay connected to everyday safety news and activities that may be used in your own newsletters or programs. If you have safety-related questions or program ideas that you would like to share, please contact Dr. Jepsen at jepsen.4@osu.edu
