

Loss Prevention Reference Note

Cell Phone Safety While Driving

The sight of a driver talking on a cell phone is quite common. The advantages are clear—users can make and confirm appointments, revise schedules and continue working while driving or waiting in traffic. Perhaps more importantly, cell phones let motorists report accidents or other traffic emergencies immediately. The downside of cell phone use in a vehicle is that it may distract the driver and increase the risk of an accident.

Even when cell phones were new, it was generally recommended that phones not be used while driving. Subsequent research has examined several aspects of in-vehicle use.

Dialing

One study confirmed that dialing a phone while driving can significantly impair vehicle control.¹ Manual dialing with console-mounted phone caused the most impairment. Dialing a dash-mounted phone had a lesser effect, comparable to tuning a radio. Drivers over the age of 55 were more affected than younger drivers.

The study further concluded that simply holding a handset may interfere with vehicle control, especially in unexpected driving situations. Based on these findings, the researchers recommended locating the phone within the driver's line of vision and cautioned drivers not to refer to printed telephone lists while driving.

The ideal way to solve these problems is to install a speaker phone with hands-free operation and memory-dialing features.

Talking

Several studies have considered the more complicated problem of distraction while talking on a vehicle phone. Although phone use does not appear to impair routine vehicle control skills, it does have an adverse effect on perceptual judgment, such as the ability to judge whether your vehicle will fit through a gap.² Performance impairment is also related to the complexity of the phone conversation.³ In a laboratory study, simulations of complex business-like calls were most detrimental to the driver's ability to identify hazardous situations and respond quickly.



Drivers over the age of 50 were two to three times more distracted by all aspects of phone use than younger drivers.

Actual Driving

Another study examined the effects of telephone use on actual driving under varying traffic conditions.⁴ While telephoning, drivers checked the rearview less frequently and their reaction times to break lights increased. Interestingly, their reaction times to speed variations improved, which may mean that some drivers compensate for the potential distraction by increasing their following distance while in phone conversation.

Although the association between increased accident risk and cell phone use is difficult to prove

conclusively, the general consensus among researchers is that the potential exists for serious problems. However, the perceived benefits clearly outweigh the perceived risks, and cell phones are here to stay. The objective, therefore, is to use in-vehicle cell phones as safely as possible. The guidelines below can help.

A final reminder: always wear your belt restraints while driving.

Guidelines for Safe Cell Phone Use

- Choose a phone with hands-free operation and memory-dialing features
 - Install the phone as near as possible to your line of vision so that your eyes are diverted from the road for the least amount of time.
 - Practice using your cell phone safely before attempting to use it while driving.
 - Program emergency numbers and frequently called numbers into your phone.
 - Place your calls when the car is stopped, if possible, and keep conversations brief while driving.
 - Make driving your priority—be aware that by using a cell phone while driving, you may be endangering yourself and others.
 - Do not engage in conversations that require note taking or complex thought.
 - Make it clear to the other party that you are using a cell phone and may need to interrupt the call to respond to traffic situations.
- Actively compensate for the potential distraction created by cell phone use—move to slower travel lanes, increase your following distance and frequently check your mirrors to assess the immediate driving situation.
 - Disconnect your cell phone if you need to jump start your vehicle and turn it off in accordance with “Blasting Operations” warning signs.

References

1. Stein, A.C., Parseghian, Z., and Allen, R.W., “A Simulator Study of the Safety Implications of Mobile Phone Use,” *31st Annual Proceedings of the American Association for Automotive Medicine*.
2. Brown, I.D., Tickner, H.H., and Simmonds, D.C.V., “Interference Between Concurrent Tasks of Driving and Telephoning,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 53, pp. 419-424.
3. McKnight, A.J., and McKnight, A.S., *The Effect of Mobile Phone Use Upon Driver Attention*, Research Report, Washington, DC: AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety.
4. Brookhuis, K.A., De Vries, G., and De Waard, D., “The Effects of Mobile Telephoning on Driving Performance,” *Accident Analysis and Prevention*, Vol, 23, No. 4, pp. 309-316.

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