

Dangers of Cell Phone Use While Driving

In your circle of friends, name five people who don't have a cell phone. Name one. Can't do it? Not surprising since, for most Americans (224 million in 2006), cell phones are an indispensable tool for communicating anytime, anywhere.

One place Americans use cell phones is in the car. While driving, you can catch up with an old friend, conduct business, order a pizza to arrive at home at the same time you do, among countless other things. Cell phones allow you to multi-task. But if you are concentrating on something other than safely operating your vehicle, you are putting yourself and others at risk. According to a recent study, driver inattention was a factor in 80% of crashes and 65% of near-crashes. What distracted most drivers: their cell phones.

A serious personal conversation or a business call shifts concentration away from your driving. Additionally, the act of dialing a number on your cell phone requires you to look at the cell phone, taking your eyes off the road. Even more distracting is text messaging. Thirty-seven percent of teens cite text messaging as their biggest distraction while driving.

Removing your focus from driving to make a call or read a text message could have disastrous consequences. A University of Utah study illustrates the extent of the danger: it found that *driving while using a cell phone (even one that is hands-free) is as dangerous as drunk driving.*

Recognizing the hazards caused by careless cell phone use by drivers, many states, including New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and California (and the District of Columbia), have instituted laws banning or restricting the use of hand-held cellular devices while driving. Businesses are taking notice too. Since 2004, American justice has seen the emergence of lawsuits against businesses whose employees caused a car crash due to cell phone use while driving. Beers Skanska Inc., a large construction firm, recently paid a \$5 million settlement to a plaintiff involved in such an accident with one of its employees.

Accidents such as these can be avoided if you think of your cell phone as a piece of safety equipment to be used in the event of an emergency. In the moments following an accident, you need your cell phone to call for help. At all other times while you are driving, you should pull off the road to a safe location to make or return a call or text message. For more tips on safe driving, go to www.nsc.org.