

Mobile phone use and road safety



Evidence indicates that using a mobile phone while driving is a distraction and has an adverse effect on driver performance. When using a mobile phone while driving, the risk of being involved in a crash is four times greater than normal. Research shows that hands-free mobile phone use while driving is just as dangerous as hand-held mobile phone use (www.ors.wa.gov.au).

The current problem

With the increase in use of technology, driver distraction poses a significant threat to road safety. A driver distraction is anything that takes your concentration away from driving. It has been estimated that distraction contributed to 32% of all road crash deaths and serious injuries in WA between 2005 and 2007¹.

Mobile phone use is one of the most common causes of distraction to drivers. Evidence² shows that using a phone while driving:

- increases a driver's mental workload,
- slows reaction times,
- impairs judgment,
- reduces ability to maintain speed and throttle control and
- reduces awareness of surroundings.

As a result of this, the chances of a crash are increased by up to four times when using a mobile phone while driving.

What the law says

The law in WA regarding mobile phone use while driving states that drivers can only use a mobile phone to make or receive a call if:

- it is secured in a mounting affixed to the vehicle, or
- if not secured, can be operated without touching it using a hands-free device.

It is an offence to create, send or look at a text message, video message, email or similar communication while driving. The GPS function of a mobile phone may be used by a driver only if the phone is secured in a mounting and the driver does not touch the phone at any time (www.ors.wa.gov.au).

While this is the law, using a phone in any manner while driving, can significantly reduce driving ability and increase the risk of a crash.

Community attitudes

A survey of the WA public in 2010 indicated that:

- 96% believe that sending or receiving text messages while driving is distracting and
- 85% believe that making or receiving a call is distracting³.

Despite this

- 54% admitted to reading text messages,
- 46% answered calls,
- 36% admitted to making phone calls and
- 35% to sending texts³.

Did you know?

As of the 2014 Easter long weekend, double demerits includes illegal use of a mobile phone while driving.

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What we know

Mobile phone use while driving can distract drivers in several ways:

- **Physical distraction** - using hands to answer or dial a number.
- **Visual distraction** - taking eyes off the road to use mobile phone.
- **Auditory distraction** - driver startled by ringing or conversation that is taking place.
- **Cognitive distraction** - diverting attention from driving to the conversation itself.

Hands-free versus hand held phone use

Evidence suggests that using a hands-free phone is not a safe alternative to hand-held phone use. Research² says that hands-free phones can reduce the physical distraction; however, the actual task of talking and listening on the phone affects the cognitive ability of the driver and distracts them from driving safely.

Phone use versus passenger conversation

Passengers can see what is happening on the road and can allow for pauses in conversation to help the driver concentrate fully if a dangerous driving situation occurs. A person on a phone however, is not aware of potential hazards and will continue to converse, potentially distracting the driver at critical moments².

Text messages

Research has found that sending text messages is far more distracting than simply talking on the phone. When text messaging, drivers can spend up to 400% more time with their eyes off the road than when they are not text messaging⁴.

Did you know?

Research⁵ shows that driver reaction times are 50% slower when using a mobile phone while driving, but only 30% slower when the driver has a blood alcohol concentration of 0.08.

What you can do?

Individuals:

- Turn off your mobile phone when driving (even if it is a hands-free mobile phone).
- Check a map or your GPS before setting off so you know directions to your destination.

Local Governments:

- Develop a safe driving policy for Council employees, which includes a 'keys in, phone off' component.
- Work with your local RoadWise Committee and/or Road Safety Advisor and media outlets to encourage local residents to turn off their phones while driving.

Organisations:

- Develop an organisational safe driving policy, which includes a 'keys in, phone off' element.
- Educate your employees on the dangers of using a mobile phone while driving.

References:

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4. Hosking, S, Young, K & Regan, M, 2007, *The effects of text messaging on young novice driver performance*, Monash University Accident Research Centre, Victoria.
5. Burns, P, Parkes, A, Burton, S, Smith, R, & Burch, D, 2002, *How dangerous is driving with a mobile phone? Benchmarking the impairment to alcohol*, TRL Report TRL547, TRL Limited, Berkshire, United Kingdom.

TOWARDS ZERO



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