Drivers Are Not Just Distracted by Cellphones; Texting, Eating, Even Grooming All Prove Hazardous on the Road

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NEW YORK, July 26, 2010? Driver distractions or inattentive driving play a part in one out of every four motor vehicle crashes. That is more than 1.5 million collisions a year and 4,300 crashes daily, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Text messaging, changing radio stations, even turning around to talk to passengers can prove deadly, according to the Insurance Information Institute (I.I.I.).

While cellphones and text messaging cause the most accidents, drivers are also distracted by using PDAs, laptops and navigational aids while driving. Other drivers create a potential hazard because they eat, drink, read, write or groom themselves when their full attention should be on the road in front of them.

?A car is not your living room, office or kitchen. It is a means of getting from one point to another and must be used judiciously,? said Loretta Worters, vice president with the I.I.I. ?People can become so absorbed in their conversations or activities that their ability to concentrate on the crucial act of driving is severely impaired, jeopardizing the safety of vehicle occupants and pedestrians.?

In January 2010, the National Safety Council (NSC) released a report estimating that at least 1.6 million crashes (28 percent of all crashes) are caused each year in the U.S. by drivers talking on cellphones (1.4 million crashes) and texting (200,000 crashes). The estimate is based on data of driver cellphone use from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and research that quantifies the risks using cellphones and texting while driving.

A July 2009 Virginia Tech Transportation Institute study found that texting while driving is far more dangerous than previously estimated. The collision risk became 23 times higher when motorists were texting while driving.

On July 21, Kentucky's new ban-on-texting-while-driving law goes into effect making it the 30th state, (including the District of Columbia and Guam), to ban texting while driving. Eleven such laws were enacted in 2010 to help stem the growing problem.

The Utah texting while driving law ban, passed in May 2009, is the toughest in the nation. Offenders convicted of causing an accident that injures or kills someone while texting behind the wheel face up to 15 years in prison. The law does not consider a crash caused by a multitasking driver as an accident, but rather as an inherently reckless act, like drunk driving.

In addition, as of June 2010 eight states (California, Connecticut, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Utah and Washington State) plus the District of Columbia, ban the use of hand-held cellphones while driving.

Employers May Be Held Liable

Employers are now concerned that they may be held liable for accidents caused by their employees while driving and conducting work-related conversations on cellphones, according to the I.I.I. Under the doctrine of vicarious responsibility, employers may be held legally accountable for the negligent acts of employees committed in the course of employment. Employers may also be found negligent if they fail to put in place a policy for the safe use of cellphones.

?In response, many companies have established cellphone usage policies,? said Worters. ?Some allow employees to conduct business over the phone as long as they pull over to the side of the road or into a parking lot. Others have completely banned the use of all wireless devices in the car.?

The I.I.I. recommends the following safety tips when driving:

• Pull Off the Road

Don?t drive while calling or texting; pull off the road to a safe location.

• Use Speed Dialing

Program frequently called numbers and your local emergency number into the speed dial feature of your phone for easy, one-touch dialing. when available, use auto answer or voice-activated dialing.

• Never Dial While Driving

If you must dial manually, do so only when stopped. Pull off the road, or better yet, have a passenger dial for you.

• Take a Message

Let your voice mail pick up your calls in tricky driving situations. It's easy?and safer?to retrieve your messages later on.

• Know When to Stop Talking

Keep conversations on the phone and in the car brief so you can concentrate on your driving. if a long discussion is required, if the topic is stressful or emotional, or if driving becomes hazardous, end your conversation and continue it once you are off the road.

• Keep the Phone in Its Holder

Make sure your phone is securely in its holder when you are not using it so it does not pop out and distract you when you are driving.

• Don't Take Notes While Driving

If you need to write something down, use a tape recorder or pull off the road.

• Don't Eat or Drink While Driving

Spills, both hot and cold, can easily cause an accident. If you have to stop short, you could also be severely burned.

• Groom Yourself At Home

Shaving, putting on makeup, combing your hair or other forms of preening are distractions and should be done at home, not while driving.

While everyone should follow these safety rules, it is particularly important to review them carefully with teens when they are first learning to drive. ?Teens and Distracted Driving?, a Pew Internet & American Life Project 2009 survey of 800 young people, found that 26 percent of American teens ages 16 to 17 have texted while driving and 43 percent have talked on a cellphone while driving. Forty-eight percent of teens ages 12 to 17 say they have been in a car when the driver was texting and 40 percent say they have been in a car when the driver used a cellphone in a way that put themselves or others in danger.

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