

Ten-Minute Training Topics

Distracted Driving Month

Statistics

“Distracted driving is a dangerous epidemic on America’s roadways. In 2010 alone, over 3,000 people were killed in distracted driving crashes.” – National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA)

“Reaching for a moving object increased the risk of a crash or near-crash by 9 times; looking at an external object by 3.7 times; reading by 3 times; applying makeup by 3 times; dialing a hand-held device (typically a cell phone) by almost 3 times; and talking or listening on a hand-held device by 1.3 times.” – Virginia Tech Transportation Institute (VTTI)

“Nearly 80 percent of crashes and 65 percent of near-crashes involved some form of driver inattention within three seconds before the event.” – VTTI

“Each day in the United States, more than 9 people are killed and more than 1,060 people are injured in crashes that are reported to involve a distracted driver” – Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Introduction

April is National Distracted Driving Awareness Month. Drivers should expect a greater mention of distracted driving in the press, but they can also expect to see a greater enforcement emphasis by police departments around the country as well.

Distracted driving comes in all shapes and forms – drivers whose focus is on something other than their driving duty are distracted and could become involved in a collision. There are three main types of driver distraction:

- **Visual:** taking your eyes off the road;
- **Manual:** taking your hands off the wheel; and
- **Cognitive:** taking your mind off what you are doing.

We commonly associate talking on a hand-held phone, texting, eating, reading maps, and conducting personal grooming as the activities chiefly responsible for distracted driving crashes. Recent studies have also measured significant levels of distraction for parents who are taking care of toddlers while they drive. Just about anything could distract us from driving since experienced drivers have a certain “comfort level” with driving – so much so that it feels like placing the vehicle on “auto pilot”.

Naturally, driving without paying proper attention is very dangerous and can lead to crashes.

Defining the Scope of the Problem

Distractions continue to grow, and youthful (new) drivers are less cautious in their habits. Consider the following details:

- In June 2011, more than 196 billion text messages were sent or received in the US, up nearly 50% from June 2009.
- 31% of U.S. drivers ages 18-64 reported that they had read or sent text messages or email messages while driving at least once within the 30 days before they were surveyed.
- Reading email, surfing the internet and using “apps” on smartphones while behind the wheel are also becoming more common.

Still, electronic distractions, while truly dangerous, are only the tip of a larger distraction iceberg. Eating while driving may seem tame in comparison since it doesn’t require deep thought, but consider that scalding coffee spilled on your shirt or lap could lead to losing control of your vehicle. Eating with one hand while trying to avoid getting greasy crumbs on your shirt certainly makes for an impressive “juggling act” while reducing your control of steering – especially if you have to make a panic maneuver.

Applying makeup or shaving on the way to the office takes our eyes off the road and occupies our hand with delicate maneuvering while the other is holding the vehicle in it’s travel lane. There’s not much wiggle room for mistakes in either case.

Pets as passengers may be nice companions, but their behavior can be unpredictable and they (sorry to say) become airborne missiles during a crash that leave both of you with serious injuries. Restraints make sense

for both your pet's sake and your own. (This is an additional reason we mandate car seats for infants and toddlers!)

Talk radio can be fun to listen to, but it's designed to get listeners engaged, enraged and upset. That's not a good combination of temperament if you're behind the wheel – better to find calm music and keep the volume reasonable.

As mentioned earlier, tending to children's concerns while driving may seem like a necessary evil, but setting simple to follow safety rules for riding in the car may help. According to the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, passengers are ranked by drivers as among the most frequent causes of distraction. Young children are four times as distracting as adults, while infants can be a whopping eight times more distracting, the AAA Foundation reports.

Realize that driving while drowsy is a form of impaired or distracted driving! Getting consistent, quality sleep is critical to keeping you focused when behind the wheel. Over the counter drugs, prescription medications and the simple ill-effects of colds/flu or chronic conditions can each mess with our focus, too.

What Can I Do?

First of all realize that your first (and only?) job when behind the wheel is paying attention to the road ahead, traffic around you and your position on the roadway. You're not in a mobile office or video arcade where you can busy yourself with other activities. Driving is one of the most complex tasks a person can do during the course of a typical day. Give it the attention it deserves – even if you've been driving for many years.

Consider the list of distracting situations we mentioned above – if any of those seem familiar to you, change your habits now, before your distraction scenario leads to a crash.

Learn about any safety policies your employer may have published – and follow them precisely. If you have questions, ask a supervisor for clarification so that you're certain about expectations.

Last, you ought to comply with your state and local laws regarding driver conduct. Thirty-nine states have a complete ban on texting while driving for all vehicle operators; six have restrictions for certain operators and five currently permit texting while driving. Eleven states prohibit hand-held cell phone use; five have partial bans on hand-held cell phone use. All states allow hands-free conversations, but it's best to stay off of the phone for two reasons – your employer may forbid all cell phone use while driving (even hands-free), studies suggest that the cognitive distraction is just as great regardless.

(<http://www.iihs.org/laws/maptextingbans.aspx>)

Summary

There is always a temptation (especially on long drives) to try to get work done or find interesting entertainment while driving. The trouble is that we can become overconfident in our use of radios, navigation systems or cell phones while driving. Further, other drivers may take excessive risks: reading, applying makeup, shaving, eating lunch (with both hands) and doing other weird activities while trying to drive a car or truck!

Remember that at **only** 45 miles per hour, a driver glancing away for **two seconds** is driving blind for a distance of 132 feet—almost half the length of a football field. As a result, the driver's reaction time is shortened dramatically. Looking away from the road, reaching to pick up something from the floor, or letting your attention focus on anything other than driving can have immediate, deadly consequences. Still, it takes about five seconds of attention to a screen and keyboard to send a brief text. Disturbingly, 77 percent of young adult drivers say they can safely drive while texting [source: stoptextsstopwrecks.org].

Stay focused. Plan ahead. Be aware of your surroundings. Avoid the temptation to “get lost” in conversations, talk radio programs or respond to aggressive drivers. Talk to your managers, family and friends about other ways to avoid distraction or inattention while driving.

SafetyFirst has additional information on: Cell Phone Use, Aggressive Drivers and Drowsiness if you have additional questions or concerns.

Stay Focused – Avoid Distracted Driving!

- Minimize distractions – focus on the road ahead, not gadgets or the radio
- Get rest to avoid drowsiness, stay calm
- Anticipate other motorists and pedestrians actions
- Use mirrors to check around your vehicle
- Plan escape routes, be prepared for stopped vehicles



“...approximately 25% of police-reported crashes involve some form of driver inattention – the driver is distracted, asleep or fatigued, or otherwise “lost in thought”.” – NHTSA Study