

SAFETY BRIEF: DISTRACTED DRIVING & INATTENTION BLINDNESS

The National Safety Council reports that more than 2,800 people in the U.S. died in distraction-related crashes in 2018—at least seven people every day. Additionally, 276,000 people were injured in distraction-related crashes in 2018. The problem is that we mistakenly believe that when we multitask, we give equal attention to each task. The human brain simply cannot do two (or more) tasks at the same time, such as driving and talking on the phone. What the brain is doing is toggling back and forth between the two tasks. Even though your brain does this toggling at lightning speed, leading to the belief that you are doing both tasks simultaneously, your reaction times are slowed.

What is inattention blindness?

Inattention blindness is defined as the failure to notice a visible hazard because your attention is focused elsewhere. This phenomenon occurs regularly when drivers are cognitively distracted. For example, you use voice commands to place a call to order pizza while driving. Your brain becomes lost in that order – thin crust or thick, pepperoni or sausage, extra cheese or not. A driver can miss up to half of what is in his or her driving environment simply because their brain is working out the pizza order.

Research shows just listening to a cell phone conversation decreases brain activity associated with driving by more than one-third, leading to safety performance issues, such as the inability to react quickly in congested driving zones.

EMPLOYER RESPONSIBILITIES

Pre-employment Check

There are steps employers can take to ensure employees are qualified to operate a motor vehicle and do so safely. This starts before hire with a pre-employment check. Employers have the responsibility of making sure employees who are required to operate a motor vehicle have the appropriate licensing and training. When screening prospective hires, it is appropriate to check applicants' driving records if the position requires the employee to operate a motor vehicle.

Written Policy

If you have employees who are required to operate motor vehicles, you need a written policy that lays out expectations for motor vehicle operators. For example, employees should be required to wear seat belts at all times and to keep cell phones turned off, or at least to pull safely to the side of the road before making or answering calls. The average cost per person involved in a crash more than doubles when that person is not restrained (restrained, \$11,310 vs. unrestrained, \$27,750). A recent National Safety Council public opinion poll revealed 80% of drivers in the U.S. incorrectly believe that hands-free devices are safer than using a handheld phone, although more than 30 studies have shown that the brain remains distracted by the cell phone conversation even when a handset is not in use.

Employers should develop written policies for driving company vehicles, communicate the policies to employees, educate employees about the policies, and create a cultural expectation



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that such policies will be followed. Employers have a vested interest in educating employees about distracted driving and related policies to prevent employee injury or death and also protect the organization's image.

EMPLOYEE RESPONSIBILITIES

Vehicle Inspection

Conduct a visual inspection of your vehicle before you climb into the driver's seat. Note the general condition and look for obvious trouble signs, such as fluid leakage. Check that tires are in good condition and properly inflated. Verify that all lights are operating: headlights, taillights, and directional signals. If the vehicle is shared with other drivers, make sure that the mirrors are properly adjusted for you. If the vehicle is unfamiliar, take time to familiarize yourself with the instrument layout. Finally, make sure you have a sufficient quantity of fuel for your trip.

Backing

Every vehicle has blind spots. Drivers need to remember that mirrors can never give the whole picture while backing. Walking around a vehicle before backing gives a driver a firsthand view of the backing area and any limitations or dangers. Check for any obstructions, including low-hanging branches, wires, or other potential clearance-related problems. If another person is acting as a spotter, use hand signals rather than verbal ones and make sure you understand each other's signals. No amount of forward-driving experience can help a driver with backing a truck or other vehicles. All drivers need to practice in safe surroundings until they become familiar with the way the vehicle backs up.

Stopping Distance

Stopping distance is a formula which takes into account perception time, reaction time and vehicle braking capability. Each part of the formula will vary for each individual driver and vehicle. As a general rule, keep a distance of one vehicle length for each 10 mph between your vehicle and the one in front of you. Another way to judge a safe distance from the vehicle in front of you is to follow the 2-4 second rule: pick a fixed object beside the road and count how many seconds elapse from the time the vehicle ahead of you passes the object until you pass it. You should be able to count at least 2 seconds in good driving conditions, and at least 4 seconds in poor driving conditions.

Winter Driving

Clear snow off the entire car, not just a little peephole in the windshield. You need just as much, if not more, visibility in poor conditions because you have to keep your eyes peeled for pedestrians and every driver with limited visibility who didn't clear off their vehicle. Make sure every glass surface is clear and transparent by using a snowbrush and/or ice scraper. Your side-view mirrors and all lights should be brushed and cleared as well. When it is gray or snowing, be sure to turn on the car's headlights so that you can see and be seen by surrounding traffic.

Next, clean the snow off the rest of the vehicle. Why? Because the rest of the snow will either (A) slide off the roof and cover your windshield as you're slowing down; or (B) fly off onto someone else's windshield, causing him or her to smash into you.



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Even if you maintain control of your vehicle not everyone else will, so don't ever get lulled into a false sense of security. Do everything slowly and gently. Remember, in the snow, the tires are always just barely grabbing the road. Accelerate slowly and gently, turn slowly and gently, and brake slowly and gently. To do this, you have to anticipate turns and stops. Go slowly and leave plenty of distance between yourself and other cars. Rapid movements lead to skids and loss of control. Drive as if there were eggs on the bottoms of your feet – step on the gas and the brake pedals so gently that you don't break the eggshell.

Avoid Distractions & Unsafe Acts

Sometimes a fraction of a second can mean the difference between an accident and accident avoidance. There are many unsafe acts that have become common in our culture, and the reality is that each of us at one time or another has engaged in activities that take our focus off the road. Whether you are operating a motor vehicle on the job or off, you must take individual responsibility for your actions behind the wheel and restrain from committing unsafe acts:

- * Not wearing a seatbelt
- * Eating while driving
- * Driving at unsafe speed
- * Cell phone use
- * Failure to stop or yield
- * Reaching for items
- * Failure to signal
- * Tailgating
- * Unsafe passing
- * DUI
- * Reading a map
- * Personal grooming

