



California's 2011 Distracted Driving Awareness Month FAQs

Q. What is Distracted Driving Awareness Month?

A. In response to the growing concern around the dangers of distracted driving, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has identified April as the nation's first *Distracted Driving Awareness Month*. California will join this observance during the month of April with increased public education and enforcement surrounding the very real danger of distracted driving, as well as the fine for violations.

Q. How big of a problem is distracted driving in California?

A. Driver distractions have joined alcohol and speeding as leading factors in fatal and serious injury crashes. Using cell phones while driving is now the number one source of "driver distraction" crashes in California. NHTSA indicated that 16 percent of fatal crashes in 2009 involved distracted driving and 20 percent of injury crashes involved distracted driving.

Q. How serious is the risk?

A. Drivers using cell phones are **four times** as likely to get into crashes serious enough to injure themselves.

Q: How is a phone conversation any different than talking to a passenger?

A: Cell phone and passenger conversations are very different in their level of distraction and effect on drivers. People engaged in cell phone conversations experience *inattention blindness* – that's when your brain can't see what's right in front of you because you're too busy with your call. Passengers are sharing your immediate experience and so normally react to what is happening. Scientific studies have compared the risk of cell phone conversations to passenger conversations and determined that cell phone conversations pose a much higher risk.

Q. What is the impact of cell phone use on teen driver safety?

A. According to NHTSA, the age group with the greatest proportion of distracted drivers in 2009 was the under 20 age group – 16 percent of all drivers younger than 20 involved in fatal crashes were reported to have been distracted while driving.

Q. Why are teens particularly susceptible to the dangers of distracted driving?

A. Teens are the most inexperienced drivers and also the group most likely to use a cell phone, and, particularly, text while driving. For teen drivers, passengers, cell phone conversations and text messaging are all high-risk activities.

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Q. Are hands-free devices safer?

A. No. Studies have shown little difference between the risk associated with hand-held and hands-free devices. These studies indicate that the distraction comes from the conversation, not holding the phone. It's not where your hands are. It's where your head is!

Q. What about using the speaker phone function? Is that okay?

A. Currently it is legal to use a speaker phone. However, it can't just be your cell phone on speaker that you are still holding in your hand. It has to be either a speaker phone built in to your car or your cell phone has to be physically out of your hand. Remember that the real danger is in the talking, because your brain can easily become disconnected from the task of driving. You may experience inattention blindness, when your brain doesn't see much of what is going on in front of you.

Q. How does distracted driving compare with drunk driving?

A. Texting while driving can delay a driver's reactions as much as having a blood alcohol content (BAC) of .08, the same as a drunk driver!

Q. Many things people do in cars are distracting. How is using a cell phone or texting any different than eating, drinking or listening to music?

A. The relative risk, frequency and duration of cell phone use makes it much more likely to lead to a crash or near crash than most other behaviors drivers engage in while behind the wheel. While there are a few actions that put drivers at higher risk, such as turning around and talking to back seat passengers, retrieving a dropped item or reading books and newspapers, drivers engage in these activities for short periods and much less frequently than they do cell phone conversations and texting.

Q: What if I need to use my telephone during an emergency and I do not have a hands-free device? Isn't it important to be able to use cell phones in an emergency?

A: California law allows a driver to use a wireless telephone without a hands free device to make emergency calls to a law enforcement agency, a medical provider, the fire department or other emergency services agencies. A vehicle does not need to be moving to place an emergency call. In the case of an emergency, drivers should pull over before making a call, if the situation safely permits.

Q. What other kinds of distractions contribute to crashes?

A. Eating and drinking, using a PDA or GPS, reading, applying makeup or grooming, watching videos and getting too involved with passengers can all contribute to an increase in driver distractions. The best advice is to do one thing at a time and focus on the road.



Q. What can people do to reduce distractions in the car?

A. That's easy. Drivers are always in control – in the driver's seat! Make a personal commitment not to text or use your cell phone while driving and share that commitment with your colleagues, family and friends.

Q. I just can't help but check my text messages or answer my cell phone, even when I'm driving. How can I remove the temptation?

A. Turn off your phone! It sounds easy, but it really does work! If you don't hear the ping of an incoming text message or the ringtone of your cell phone, you're more likely to focus on the road.

Q. I worry that my coworkers or friends will think I'm unresponsive if I wait until I arrive at my destination to return a text message or phone call. What can I do?

A. If you've already alerted your family and friends to expect a delayed response in the event that you're driving, consider using one of the many apps available, such as IZUP or OTTER, to hold your messages. Changing your voicemail message with a reminder such as, 'I'm unable to take your call at the moment, or I may be driving...' will also serve as a reminder that you're just being safe, not unresponsive.

Q. Can cops really enforce the hands-free or no texting laws?

A. Law enforcement agencies have developed enforcement measures for other traffic safety laws largely deemed "unenforceable" when first introduced. Laws such as requiring the use of seat belts and child passenger safety seats, among others, are today respected and successfully enforced. Law enforcement is cracking down on hand-held cell phone use and texting. The California Highway Patrol alone is writing more than 10,000 tickets a month.

Q: What are the fines if I'm convicted?

A: The base fine for the FIRST offense is \$20 and \$50 for subsequent convictions. With penalty assessments, the total ticket cost can be more than triple the base fine amount – a minimum of \$159 on a first offense and \$279 on subsequent offenses.

Q. Will law enforcement really be looking for drivers who are texting while driving or using a hand-held device?

A. Yes! More than 225 local law enforcement agencies throughout California, in addition to the California Highway Patrol, will be enforcing 'zero tolerance' days throughout the month of April, and all year long.