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Chuck Hurley: Hands-free car phones not risk free

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Chuck Hurley

CNN's Carol Lin talks with Chuck Hurley and Jonathan Adkins about a new report that says cell phone use while driving is safety hazard.

Hurley is with the National Safety Council, and Adkins is with www.statesafety.org -- an organization looking into highway safety. His group does not think cell phones should be singled out.

LIN: Chuck, I know you brought some tools with you, and I think this will be helpful too, because most of us are pretty used to multitasking in the car. I mean, if you're not talking on your phone, maybe you're, you know, drinking, or you're putting a little mascara on at the stoplight.

How is it that your scientists at the University of Utah found that even hands-free devices can be just as dangerous as talking on a hand-held?

HURLEY: Well, the study we're reporting on our Web site today -- it was done by the University of Utah and several scientists there, Dr. Strayer first and foremost -- found three things. One is that study participants, while talking on the phone, missed twice as many simulated traffic signals as when they weren't talking on the phone. Second, that they took longer to react to traffic signals. And third, that there was no difference between hand-held and hands-free performance. I should stress this was a small sample size in a simulated study. But it does raise the concern certainly that hands-free is not risk free.

LIN: Well, is this a call, then, to ban all cell phone use in cars?

HURLEY: Well, the policy of the National Safety Council is not to ban yet. We -- with the exception that we do support a ban for teenage drivers when participating in graduated licensing programs. In fact, we have supported a bill in Illinois by Senator Cullerton to that effect.

But it is -- this probably validates the common-sense advice from the National Safety Council, except for emergencies, don't talk and drive.

LIN: All right. Jonathan Adkins, what do you make of this study?

ADKINS: Well, we agree. We are glad to see some additional research. We have been saying all along that hands-free and hand-held are both dangerous. We have urged further education for the research. This is just one report from one special-interest group, but we're glad to see it. We have urged Congress to continue to fund the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, so they can get a better grasp of this issue.

Cell phones are one of many distractions -- changing a CD, eating in the car, changing the dials on the radio. We want to make sure that we're discussing the whole distracted-driving issue and not just cell phones.

LIN: So are you for or against regulating cell phone use in cars?

ADKINS: We are for education. At this point, we do not support a ban on cell phones. We would much rather see a large educational effort and more research

LIN: Chuck, is there time for a public education campaign? I mean, in essence, aren't organizations or anybody who is trying to do the educating, teaching the obvious that are distracted from anything but the priority of steering that car or truck down the road, that it's dangerous?

HURLEY: Well, we do support a strong education program. But I think it's important to point out that not all risks are created equal -- that this study found that the risk of talking on a cell phone is greater, for example, than ones that don't involve cognitive effort like tuning the radio or eating a sandwich.

But the study is available on our Web site, nsc.org and in our publication "Injury Insights." And we would invite public attention to that study.

LIN: But help us ... make out at this point whether what we do in our car is safe or dangerous. I mean, in your study you are talking about 64 people who were tested. First, explain how they were tested, and exactly what happened next.

HURLEY: Well, they were tested in a controlled environment, and they were reacting to simulated traffic signals. And the study participants who were talking on a cell phone, again, missed twice as many traffic signals as when they were not talking on the cell phone. That it took longer to react to the traffic signals, and again, there was no difference between hands-free and hand-held in their performance.

It just, again, drives home the point that except for emergencies, the best practice and the common-sense advice of the National Safety Council is, except for emergencies, don't talk and drive.

LIN: What do you think government's role should be in regulating driver behavior?

HURLEY: Well, this is mainly an issue for state government rather than the federal government. And they have a long history of taking corrective action when risks like this are imposed.

The deeper concern is we are probably at the front end of a technological revolution, where not just cell phones, but a lot of telematics -- anything

from fax machines to stock quotes to restaurant guides and direction finders will be in cars very soon. And so it's important to really assess these risks before they become a problem.

LIN: So, Jonathan Adkins, do you think then the City of New York is on the right track in banning hand-held devices but permitting hands-free devices?

ADKINS: Well, this research would show that, in fact, they are not -- that hands-free and hand-held are both dangerous. We would rather see a strong education campaign and more research.

An AAA study out also fairly recently disputes the finding that changing a CD and those other things aren't as dangerous. It actually says they're about 10 times more dangerous than talking on your cell phone.

So we need to do more research. We don't know enough at this point, but we also agree with the National Safety Council that federal legislation is not appropriate at this time.

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