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- ENTERTAINMENT
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- EDUCATION
- IN-DEPTH

Study: All cell phones distract drivers

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By Julie Vallese
CNN Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON (CNN) -- Cell phone use while driving, whether hand-held or hands-free, leads to poor driver performance, according to a new study published Thursday by the National Safety Council.

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The study, conducted by the University of Utah, suggests local laws that allow hands-free cell phone use will have very little effect on reducing driver distractions.

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Instead, the study finds, any kind of cell phone use, and the cognitive engagement needed, is what impairs a driver's decision-making ability.

"This study adds new data on the ongoing national debate on driver distractions and their causes," said Alan C. McMillan, president of the National Safety Council.

"And it underscores the importance of reiterating that a driver's primary obligation is to operate his or her motor vehicle safely."

Sixty-four participants were asked to conduct various tasks, such as changing radio stations, listening to the radio, listening to books on tape, talking on a hand-held cell phone and talking on a hands-free cell phone.

As they performed these tasks, their response times were measured during stopping or braking.

Researchers found when participants were using a cell phone their response times were dramatically slower than when listening to the radio or a book on tape.

When using cell phones, participants came up late in braking for a red light or missed

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Cell phone facts

120.1 million cell phones in use in the United States

By 2005 there will be 1.26 billion cell phones used around the world

47.5 percent of cell phones use digital technology

Nearly 118,000 wireless calls are made each day to 911 and other emergency numbers, more than 43 million annually.

the light entirely. Researches found no significant difference to response time whether a hand-held or hands-free phone was being used.

"A great deal more research like this is needed to help us fully understand the public policy implications of the growing use of cell phones and other electronic devices such as global positioning systems, faxes and computers in moving vehicles," said McMillan.

The Cellular Telecommunications and Internet Association estimates there are more than 120 million cellular phones in operation in the United States. By 2005, there will be well over 1 billion cell phone users around the world.

A half millions drivers are using cell phones at any given time during the day

Van and SUV drivers use their phones the most

Women use their phones more than men

54 percent of drivers have wireless phones in their vehicle at all times

Sources: Cellular Telecommunications and Internet Association; National Highway Transportation Safety Administration

CITA says it is trying to educate drivers on how to use cell phones properly, citing a series of public service announcements it released this year.

"Any activity a driver engages in, besides the task of driving, has the potential to distract," said Tom Wheeler, CTIA president and CEO, in a statement responding to the study.

"Therefore, we must remind drivers that their primary responsibility is to drive safely and we must educate them on how to recognize when it's appropriate to use a wireless phone, change a CD, or look at a map while driving."

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration released a report last month estimating that 3 percent of drivers are talking on hand-held cell phones at any given time of the day.

The study looked only at the use of hand-held phones and did not attempt to link cell phone use and traffic crashes.

NHTSA has released separate information suggesting the distraction of using a cell phone can be blamed for 20 to 30 percent of all crashes.

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