



All drivers calling

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Now that ‘everyone’ has a cell phone the next step should be learning how to use them safely. Stand at

any intersection in probably any town in Canada and should you decide to count how many people are driving while on the phone, you will soon run out of fingers... and toes.... Not only does ‘everyone’ have a cell phone, ‘everyone’ is also using them while driving. You might as well drive drunk (we are being rhetorical—don’t really do it).

We all know stories of drivers heading somewhere while applying makeup, eating and drinking or even reading, but this one takes the cake. A CBC radio host was recently describing his drive into the city very early in the morning, and his discovery of a scooter rider driving down the road with a cell phone on one ear, and one hand on the throttle (yes, it was the brake hand holding the phone).

That may be an extreme version of driving while on the phone, but the dangers are no less in another vehicle. Much research has been done on the correlations between using a phone while driving and the likelihood of being in an accident. For example, a driver using a cell phone is four to six times more likely to be involved in a motor vehicle collision. Motorists talking even on hands free phones were 18 percent slower to brake when needed.

Worse even than talking on the phone is ‘texting’ while driving, another potentially lethal behaviour. A study by Nationwide Insurance in the U.S. found that

19 percent of motorists say they do text message while driving. Watch out!

Using any phone while driving is just one more distraction for the driver, one more demand for his attention. The act of driving is a very complex activity that demands full attention, and not just in heavy traffic. Indeed, in a low traffic situation the driver might be even less attentive, but that little girl up ahead is just as likely to jump out in front of the car.

Almost four out of five vehicle crashes, and two-thirds of near crashes, involve some form of driver inattention within three seconds of the event. Three seconds: quick dialling one number; pondering a point while talking; keying a word or two. All these demands reduce a driver’s attention to other vehicles, pedestrians and objects on the road.

Consider for a moment, the difference in attention required for walking down a busy street in comparison to driving a vehicle along that same street. If the pedestrian using a cell phone while walking was at higher risk of being hit, wouldn’t that highlight the dangers of driving (versus walking) of using a phone on the move? Well, the pedestrian is more likely to get hit! That should clarify the risks of driving on the phone.

This is not to say that we should not have cell phones at all. They certainly have benefits including a way to make emergency calls, to connect with friends or to keep track of your kids. However, use it at the wrong moment and you’re dead, or worse: someone else is—because of you.

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