

# Study Shows Use of Hands-Free Cell Phones Isn't Any Safer



The prevailing wisdom has been that using cell phones while driving was dangerous unless you used a hands-free device. In that vein, a whole slew of devices have been installed in vehicles that allow for hands-free/voice-activated operation, including GPS.

But a [new study](#) from the [AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety](#) undercuts that presumption and demonstrates that use of hands-free devices doesn't make cell phone use behind the wheel any safer. (A point also made in [this infographic](#).)

The study (this [fact sheet](#) has the highlights) starts from the foundation that there are three main sources of driver distraction:

- **Visual** (eyes off the road)
- **Manual** (hands off the wheel)
- **Cognitive** (mind off the task).

Studying cognitive distractions has been a challenge. The goal of the AAA study was to:

- Isolate the cognitive elements of distracted driving;
- Evaluate the amount of cognitive workload caused by various tasks performed by drivers; and
- Rank tasks according to how much cognitive distraction they cause.

The researchers conducted three types of experiments, measuring:

- Subjective workload ratings
- Brake reaction time
- Following distance
- Brainwave activity
- Eye and head movements
- Reaction time and accuracy to peripheral light detection test.

In each experiment, they analyzed six common driver tasks:

- Listening to the radio
- Listening to an audiobook
- Talking with a passenger
- Talking on a handheld phone
- Talking on a hands-free phone
- Using a speech-to-text email system.

The study found that even when a driver's eyes are on the road and hands are on the wheel, sources of *cognitive* distraction cause significant impairments to driving, such as:

- **Suppressed brain activity** in the areas needed for safe driving;
- **Increased reaction time**;
- **Missed cues** and decreased accuracy; and
- **Decreased visual scanning** of the driving environment (think tunnel vision).

The worst culprit'driver interactions with in-vehicle speech-to-text systems'which are offered in many new vehicles'create the highest level of cognitive distraction among the tasks assessed.

*Bottom line:* Hands-free doesn't mean risk free.

So ensure that you have a comprehensive [cell phone use policy](#) that bars the use of hand-free devices and requires workers to

pull off to the side of the road if they need to use their cell phone while driving.

Go the OHS Insider's [Cell Phone and Other Electronic Devices Compliance Centre](#) for additional resources, including:

- a [slideshow](#) on 11 lawsuits involving worker distracted driving
- the [dangers of texting while driving](#)
- a briefing for senior management on company [liability for distracted driving accidents](#)
- a [Music Device Policy](#)
- a [Distracted Driving Infographic](#).

At [SafetyPoster.com](#), you can buy a [poster on cell phone distractions on the job](#).

And at [Safety Smart](#), you'll find a [safety talk](#) on distracted driving. Not a Safety Smart member? Sign up for a [free day trial](#).