

Walking While Using a Cell Phone Is Dangerous, Too



Study after study has found that using cell phones while driving a vehicle is dangerous because it distracts drivers from focusing on the road and its hazards. But it turns out that distracted walking is dangerous, too.

[Researchers in the US](#) conducted two studies and found that, for pedestrians as with drivers, cognitive distraction from the use of cell phones reduces situational awareness and increases unsafe behaviour, putting pedestrians at greater risk for accidents.

One study looked at whether pedestrians suffer distraction from conversations on cell phones, which might reduce their awareness of their surroundings.

All participants walked a prescribed route, but half of them did so while having a telephone conversation on a cell phone; the other half simply held the phone, awaiting a potential call, which never came.

Before the study, five 'out-of-place' objects had been planted along the route: three at eye level (a sign reading UNSAFE!, a boot and a cup) and two at ground level (two pieces of fake vomit and a chalk sketch of an ostrich with its head in the ground).

At the end of the walk, an interviewer showed each participant five sets of four photographs. Each set had one planted object

mixed with three deflector objects. The interviewer asked the participants which items, if any, they recalled seeing.

The researchers found that pedestrians noticed significantly more objects when they weren't talking on cell phones than when they were.

In the second study, researchers sought to see if people talking on cell phones at street crossings were more likely to exhibit unsafe behaviour than those listening to iPods and those not using either a mobile phone or an iPod. (Like mobile phones, iPods are distracting but place less demands on the user.)

Comparisons of the three groups found a higher percentage of unsafe behaviour, such as crossing when a car approached, among the mobile phone group than among the pedestrians using iPods or those using neither device.

Bottom line: Reduced situational awareness and distraction caused by the use of cell phones by pedestrians increases the likelihood that they'll take risks, engage in unsafe behaviour and so be more vulnerable to injury.

What do these findings mean for workplaces'

You can't just worry about barring workers from using cell phones when they're behind the wheel of a vehicle or powered mobile equipment. Instead, you should restrict the use of cell phones in the workplace overall, such as barring their use on the factory floor or construction site or limiting their use to break rooms.

For further proof that cell phone use in the workplace is hazardous, consider these incidents:

- A construction worker in New Brunswick was so distracted on his cell phone that he stepped right in front of a truck and was seriously injured.

- At a construction site in BC, a section manager made a call on his cell phone. He stopped with his back to a truck, unaware that it was backing up. The truck's rear tires snagged the back of his leg and pulled him under the truck. He died from his injuries.

To ensure that workers aren't distracted by their cell phones both while behind the wheel and on the job in general, implement a comprehensive [cell phone use policy](#) that covers:

- Prohibited uses, both in general and when driving or operating equipment
- Permitted uses
- Consequences of violations of the policy.

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

- the [dangers of texting while driving](#)
- a briefing for senior management on company [liability for distracted driving accidents](#)
- a [Model Cell Phone Use Policy](#)
- a [Model Distracted Driving Policy](#)
- a [Music Device Policy](#)
- a [Distracted Driving Infographic](#).