

Cell Phones, Distracted Driving, and Crash Risks

Cell phones, like many other electronic devices, provide a variety of benefits to their users. They are a great modern convenience. Used improperly, however, they can be dangerous to the user, to passengers, and to others on roads and highways.

In order to reduce accidents, Kentucky legislators have passed a new law prohibiting texting while driving. The new law goes into effect January 1, 2011. Considering that reaction times when driving while texting are slower than those for driving drunk, the new law could be a lifesaver.

Automobile accidents are the leading cause of death for 15 to 20 year olds. Young drivers are not the only ones who text while driving; however, they are less experienced and less aware of the risks than are their adult counterparts. Even without cell phones, teens are easily distracted by friends in the car and by their own emotional states. However, it is not safe for anyone to text while driving. Also, under the new law, Kentucky drivers under age 18 will not be allowed to use any type of communication device while their vehicle is in motion.



On the flip side, cell phones are invaluable for safety and emergency situations. For example, if your car is having mechanical problems, you can pull over to the side of the road and call for help. Most new cell phones have navigational systems, or GPS, to locate your position. If you are driving in an unfamiliar location, you can access your GPS on the cell phone to arrive at your destination. Parents can also utilize tracking devices on cell phones to find the locations of their children.

There is one possible exception for using a cell phone while driving. If signaled to pull over by an unmarked police car and you have a concern for your personal safety, you can dial 911. The dispatcher can stay on the phone and check the authenticity of the police officer while you drive to a well-lit public place. If you have encountered a criminal posing as a police officer, the cell phone will help track your location. This safety measure is within your legal rights.

Parents of new drivers should talk with their teens about safe driving practices. Discuss more than the effects of texting and/or talking on a cell phone while driving. Talking to other passengers in the car can be very distracting. So can eating, reading a map or driving directions, or even adjusting the controls of the stereo system. Any of these behaviors can cause accidents.

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, distracted driving is the main cause of most accidents. They cite three main types of distractions:

- Visual — taking your eyes off the road
- Manual — taking your hands off the wheel
- Cognitive — taking your mind off what you're doing

“While all distractions can endanger drivers’ safety, texting is the most alarming because it involves all three types of distraction.”

Other driving behaviors are as dangerous as texting. Shaving or putting on makeup while driving should be avoided. Parents would do well to seek teachable moments to guide their teenagers’ driving behavior. Drivers need to pay attention to all aspects of driving, including other drivers’ behavior. Teens will encounter many adults who don’t drive well. These can be taken as examples of what not to do.

Another way for parents to ensure safe driving practices is to install electronic devices, such as GPS and video cameras. These devices can monitor the way teens drive. Monitoring services are usually operated by independent companies. They alert parents of teenagers’ unsafe driving by e-mail, text message, or phone. Some insurers now offer discounts for parents and teens who participate in these safe driving programs.

Driving a car is the most dangerous activity most people undertake in their daily lives. Anything that distracts a driver should be avoided. The U.S. Department of Transportation recently reported that nearly 6,000 people were killed and a half-million were injured last year in vehicle crashes connected to driver distraction. While cell phones provide many modern conveniences, they are best used when a vehicle is not in motion.



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