DISTRACTED DRIVING

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The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) defines distracted driving as any activity that diverts attention from driving including talking or texting on your phone, eating and drinking, talking to people in your vehicle, fiddling with the stereo, entertainment, or navigation system — anything that takes your attention away from the task of safe driving. Texting is the most alarming distraction. Sending or reading a text takes your eyes off the road for 5 seconds. At 55 mph, the impact is like driving the length of an entire football field with your eyes closed.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, an average of 3,000 people will die in accidents each year in the United States involving a distracted driver.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF DISTRACTED DRIVING

Though distracted driving is often most associated with using a cell phone for texts or calls, there are many different types of distracted driving that may contribute to a driver's manual, visual, and cognitive impairment. Some distractions, such as texting and driving, may include impairments in all three areas.

Distracted driving can be **extremely dangerous and even deadly** and it is important for drivers to understand what exactly constitutes a distraction when they are on the road in order to keep themselves and others safe. As defined by NHTSA, a driver is engaging in distracted driving behavior when:

- Texting.
- Using a cell phone or smartphone.
- Eating and/or drinking.
- Talking to passengers.
- Grooming.
- Reading, including maps.
- Using a navigation system.
- Watching a video.
- Adjusting a radio or other listening device.
- Daydreaming.
- Visual impairment/glare.

THREE CATEGORIES OF DISTRACTED DRIVING

Law enforcement and researchers tend to use three categories when discussing distracted driving: manual distractions, visual distractions, and cognitive distractions.

Manual Distractions

Distractions that cause manual impairment involve the driver taking one or both hands off the wheel to perform the task. These distractions include but are not limited to, eating, drinking, helping a child with their car seat or seat belt, smoking, rummaging through personal belongings, and turning knobs such as the radio or air conditioning. These distractions can be dangerous because they make it difficult for the driver to control the vehicle and react in time, causing them to veer off the road or into traffic and other cars.

Visual Distractions

Visual distractions are what most people associate with distracted driving and include partaking in any activity that causes your eyes to wander off the road. Visual impairment includes texting and driving, looking at a navigation system, electronic car devices, looking at billboard advertisements, grooming, and more.

Visual distractions are particularly dangerous because they impair a driver's ability to consistently assess their surroundings for potential hazards drivers must do to ensure their own safety as well as the safety of others on the road.

Cognitive Distractions

Cognitive distractions are less straightforward than the other two since they do not involve taking your hands off the steering wheel or looking away from the road. A cognitive distraction is one that causes a driver's focus to drift away from driving and includes using hands-free calling devices, talking to other passengers, daydreaming, listening to the radio, and more. Studies have shown that using hands-free devices to make phone calls is no safer than using handheld devices. In fact, the National Safety Council (NSC) contends that drivers can miss 50% of what they see if they are talking on a hands-free device.

Cognitive distractions are deceiving because they allow drivers to have a full view of their surroundings but are not able to fully process hazards that could occur. Research shows that younger drivers, particularly those in their teens or early twenties, are more susceptible to distractions. The allure of smartphones and the perceived need to stay connected often lead to increased instances of distracted driving in this age bracket.

Before heading out, adjust your car's side mirrors and rear-view mirror. Pick what you want to listen to. If you will be using a navigation system, enter the address of where you are going and check the route so you have an idea of where you're going and can keep your eyes on the road.

When driving, do not multitask. Always keep both hands on the wheel and stay focused on the road. One out of every four car accidents in the United States is caused by texting and driving. Texting while driving is six times more likely to cause an accident than driving drunk. Answering a text takes your attention away for about five seconds.

Departments have multiple avenues to help their employees reduce the risk. Below are common and practical approaches:

- Provide sufficient training on distracted driving behaviors and how to avoid them.
- Ensure health and safety management systems are in place to protect employees and examine employees' adherence to distracted-driving policies.
- Ensure distracted driving policies are consistent and clearly emphasized.
- Address operational aspects of the work that could conflict with distracted-driving policies such as manipulating software and monitoring multiple screens while driving.
- Ensure employees are not using employer-issued or personal cell phones when driving.
- Ensure employees are enrolled in the DMV – Employers Pull Notice Program.
- Ensure driving and disciplinary policies are implemented.
- Implement a How-Am-I Driving Bumper Sticker Program on county vehicles to allow reporting of good or poor driving behavior.
- Establish a Vehicle Safety Committee to develop and promote driving safety initiatives and culture. The Committee should also review incidents and determine remedial measures.