

# ‘Distracted driving’ at an all-time high

CORVALLIS – Young, inexperienced drivers have always gotten into more automobile accidents, but if you add in a lot of distractions, it’s a recipe for disaster – and a new Pacific Northwest research program is learning more about these risks while identifying approaches that may help reduce them.

Distractions have been an issue since the age of the Model T, whether a driver was eating a sandwich or talking to a passenger. But the advent of cell phones, text messaging and heavy urban traffic has taken those distractions to a historic level, say researchers, who emphasize that there appears to be value in educating young drivers about these special risks.

A new study of 3,000 teenage drivers in Alaska, Washington, Idaho and Oregon has found that interactive presentations administered to young drivers in a classroom or auditorium – more than passive listening – can have some ability to raise their awareness of this problem. Experts conclude

that more work of this type should be pursued nationally.

“Based on recent studies, anything that takes your attention away, any glance away from the road for two seconds or longer can increase the risk of an accident from four to 24 times,” said David Hurwitz, an assistant professor of transportation engineering in the College of Engineering at Oregon State University, and corresponding author of the study, which was published in the *Journal of Transportation Safety and Security*.

“This is a dramatic increase in risk, with inexperienced drivers who are least able to handle it,” he said. “The absolute worst is texting on a cell phone, which is a whole group of distractions. With texting, you’re doing something besides driving, thinking about something besides driving, and looking at the wrong thing.”

One study has equated texting on a cell phone equivalent to driving drunk.

While many young drivers understand the risks of

texting, Hurwitz said, they are much less aware of other concerns that can be real – eating, drinking, talking on a cell phone, smoking, adjusting the radio, changing a CD, using a digital map or other controls.

“Automobile manufacturers have made cars significantly safer, but in the interests of passenger comfort they also continue to add more pleasant distractions within the vehicle,” Hurwitz said. “More experienced drivers learn how to control these distractions, but we’re finding the most problems with the very young driver, within six months of getting a license.”

Aside from lack of experience, he said, young drivers also have a higher risk tolerance, use seat belts less, and choose higher speeds. The recent research found that 27 percent of respondents changed clothes or shoes while driving, and some worked on homework. Adding more distractions doesn’t help.

What researchers found

that can help is “interactive” driver training that focuses on the issue of distractions, which can be done with driving simulators or simple computers, and can involve writing, discussion and tactile problem-solving.

“Young people learn better when they are involved in the process, not just sitting and listening to a lecture,” Hurwitz said. “We think an increase in active learning will help with this problem and can improve driver education. Students doing this can see how much better their awareness and reaction time are when they aren’t distracted.”

The research is finding some surprises, as well.

Studies are showing that “hands-free” cell phones are really no safer than a hand-held cell phone. The real distraction appears to be the driver talking to someone who is not in the car, a distant voice who’s oblivious to the freeway traffic jam.

“The evidence suggests that it may be reasonably safe to have passengers that you

talk to in the car,” Hurwitz said. “For one thing, if an incident happens that requires a quick reaction, everyone in the car may see it, stop talking and pay immediate attention. And you literally have more sets of eyes on the road to see upcoming problems.”

There are some gender differences among young drivers. Females are more likely to use a cell phone while driving, and males are more likely to look away from the road while talking to others in the car.

A large increase in this type of training will be necessary for it to become more widely integrated, the researchers said.

This project was funded by the Pacific Northwest Transportation Consortium, an initiative supported by OSU, the University of Washington, University of Idaho, Washington State University and the University of Alaska-Fairbanks.

A YouTube video about this “distracted driver” program is available online: <http://bit.ly/1MuqpNC>.

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