

Walking hazard: Cell-phone use -- but not music -- reduces pedestrian safety

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Psychology professor Art Kramer and his colleagues found that young and old pedestrians are impaired when talking on hands-free cell phones. Credit: Photo by L. Brian Stauffer, U. of I. News Bureau.

Two new studies of pedestrian safety found that using a cell phone while hoofing it can endanger one's health. Older pedestrians, in particular, are impaired when crossing a busy (simulated) street while speaking on a mobile phone, the researchers found.

The studies, in which participants crossed a virtual street while talking on the phone or listening to music, found that the music-listeners were able to navigate traffic as well as the average unencumbered [pedestrian](#). Users of hands-free cell phones, however, took longer to cross the same

street under the same conditions and were more likely to get run over.

Older cell-phone users, especially those unsteady on their feet to begin with, were even more likely to become traffic casualties.

"Many people assume that walking is so automatic that really nothing will get in the way," said University of Illinois psychology professor Art Kramer, who led the research with psychology professor Jason McCarley and postdoctoral researcher Mark Neider. "And walking is pretty automatic, but actually walking in environments that have lots of obstacles is perhaps not as automatic as one might think."

The first study, in the journal [Accident Analysis and Prevention](#), found that college-age adults who were talking on a cell phone took 25 percent longer to cross the street than their peers who were not on the phone. They were also more likely to fail to cross the street in the 30 seconds allotted for the task, even though their peers were able to do so.

Each participant walked on a manual treadmill in a [virtual environment](#), meaning that each encountered the exact same conditions - the same number and speed of cars, for example - as their peers.

The second (and not yet published) study gave adults age 60 and above the same tasks, and included some participants who had a history of falling. The differences between those on and off the phone were even more striking in the older group, Kramer said.

"Older adults on the phone got run over about 15 percent more often" than those not on the phone, he said, and those with a history of falling fared even worse.

"So [walking](#) and talking on the phone while old, especially, appears to be dangerous," he said.

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign ([news](#) : [web](#))

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