

Rural drivers using cell phones are likely to cause accidents

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Rural drivers using cell phones while driving are nearly four times more likely to cause automobile accidents than rural drivers not using cell phones, according to a new study by the Western Transportation Institute based at Montana State University.

As one of the first studies conducted in rural areas, the findings corroborate data showing that rural drivers should hang up and drive.

Researchers tested 36 drivers aged 18 to 63 in a simulated vehicle and asked the drivers to dial the national 511 highway information system. Drivers then had to follow instructions and punch in numbers to access specific highway information such as road closures or weather-related driving conditions. Meanwhile, the simulator screens in front of the drivers presented unexpected obstacles such as wildlife, farm vehicles or pedestrians on the road.

"Based on the fact that drivers are 3.8 times more likely to get in a car accident when using a cell phone, it is best to dial before driving," said WTI researcher Laura Stanley. "It is preferable that drivers don't use cell phones while driving, whether on urban or rural roads, because most research shows a higher risk of being involved in an accident. It's a driver distraction."

She compares the level of distraction to driving while intoxicated.

"One study showed that driving while using a cell phone is like being at .08 blood-alcohol content limit, which is the legal limit in Montana," she said.

"I was surprised at how distracted I was by dialing the cell phone," said study subject, Jeralyn Brodowy of Bozeman. "I was so distracted that I ran into (simulated) deer--a herd of deer actually."

Brodowy said that she owns a cell phone, but after the study, she began limiting use while driving.

"I'm not ready to give up my cell phone," she said. "It's too much of a convenience. I have tried to not use it as much while driving."

Stanley notes that while more cities and states consider banning cell phone use while driving, some cities like New York and Washington, D.C., simply ban hand-held cell phones while driving, yet allow hands-free calling. Stanley notes that it appears to be the distraction of conversing on the phone rather than holding or manipulating it that causes accidents.

"Our study shows that drivers are as equally distracted with the hands-free calls as they are with hand-held," said Stanley.

Stanley and the WTI research team of Michael Kelly and Suzanne Lassacher were surprised to find that basic driving performance, lane keeping and consistent speed were not affected by dialing the 511 traveler information system.

"What we found is that situation awareness, how aware you are of changing situations was highly affected," Stanley said. "Accidents tended to occur when the drivers using the cell phones encountered a hazard they were not expecting."

Stanley is presenting her findings in late June at the Third International Driving Symposium on Human Factors in Driver Assessment Training and Vehicle Design conference in Rockport, Maine.

Source: Montana State University-Bozeman

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