**Distraction Article for Drivers**

Many drivers don’t consider distracted driving as dangerous as falling asleep at the wheel, or drink driving. In reality, it can produce just the same horrific consequences. Distractions are anything that takes your attention away from driving – which causes poor hazard awareness, slow reaction time, and a greatly increased risk of collision.

It’s tempting to think about distraction as manual, visual or cognitive – hands, eyes and brain. However, mostly distraction is either physical – you are doing something which means your body can’t control the vehicle – or it’s mental – your brain is engaged in something else. Often, it’s both.

The truth is our brains aren’t designed for multitasking. Driving takes a huge amount of mental work, even if it doesn’t feel like it. And the brain really only does one thing at a time.

Imagine you are reading a text. Your brain is using your visual, language and executive (decision making) functions to see the text, to understand it, and to formulate a response. This means that even if you believe you are glancing at the road, your brain will not process what you are seeing on the road, or read road signs, or have any situational awareness because it is busy decoding that text.

There’s more. The brain doesn’t differentiate between what is real and what is imaginary. If you imagine something vividly, then your brain also uses your visual processing ability. Try it. If you are visualising your front door, you cannot simultaneously ‘see’ what is in front of you.

This is one reason that hands free calls are so dangerous – because we become involved in the conversation, imagining the person, the situations we are discussing and problems to be solved. Even though you are looking straight ahead, the chances are your visual processing systems are ‘seeing’ something quite different.

One [in-depth study of the effect of hands-free calls](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0361198119846463) using simulators showed that drivers actually stop looking at hazards while engaged in a conversation.

Voice activation systems are also a distraction – again because it’s the same brain issuing instructions as is trying to drive.

What’s more, it takes time for our brain to switch task – a [University of Utah study in 2015](https://unews.utah.edu/up-to-27-seconds-of-inattention-after-talking-to-your-car-or-smart-phone/#:~:text=The%20graphic%20illustrates%20a%20key,takes%20up%20to%2027%20seconds)[[1]](#footnote-1) found that it could take up to 27 seconds for the brain to start processing driving information again after giving voice commands or reading a text.

**Collision risk**

Distraction is extremely dangerous because vehicles move fast and the road environment changes fast. If you are travelling at 30mph, you cover 27 metres in **two seconds**. At 60 mph, that’s 54 metres. That’s in two seconds. How far would your vehicle travel without your attention if it takes you five seconds to compose a text and 27 seconds for your brain to refocus on the road?

If you are distracted your vehicle is covering that distance without anyone behind the wheel – and if you do need to react suddenly, your reaction will be much slower, and you will have far less time to react in than if you had been focused on driving.

Distraction contributes to a lot of collisions. SmartDrive Systems has analysed 330m pieces of fleet footage and in a comparison between HGV drivers who had collisions and those who did not, found that [collision drivers were more distracted across the board](https://smartdrive.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/SmartIQ_Beat_Trucking_Collision_Vol_1_Oct2016_updated.pdf), with hands free calls being the most common distractor – something they did 40% more than non-collision drivers.

Furthermore, [The 100-Car Naturalistic Study](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237252699_An_overview_of_the_100-car_naturalistic_study_and_findings) captured two million miles of driving across one year – and showed that **78% of crashes and 65% of near crashes** had inattention or distraction as a contributing factor.

Typical distractions include:

* Programming your sat nav, putting on your seatbelt, or adjusting your driving position while moving. Do these things before pulling away.
* Changing the radio or fiddling with infotainment systems.
* Phone calls, whether handsfree or not. This includes [video calls](https://www.rac.co.uk/drive/advice/legal/using-mobile-phones-while-driving-data-facts-and-figures/#:~:text=Report%20on%20Motoring-,How%20many%20road%20deaths%20are%20caused%20by%20drivers%20using%20a,to%20be%20a%20contributory%20factor.) which one in 10 drivers admits to doing. If work calls, wait until you can pull over safely and then ring back.
* Texts and social media. An [RAC survey](https://www.rac.co.uk/drive/advice/legal/using-mobile-phones-while-driving-data-facts-and-figures/#:~:text=Report%20on%20Motoring-,How%20many%20road%20deaths%20are%20caused%20by%20drivers%20using%20a,to%20be%20a%20contributory%20factor.) showed 15% of drivers check messages on their phones, and 10% write texts, emails, or social media posts while behind the wheel.
* Notifications. Silence them while you’re driving. Not only does your brain hear and respond to notifications, which is distracting, but people often feel under pressure (internally and from others) to read and respond. Some research suggests [97% of texts in the UK](https://www.textanywhere.com/resources/blog/textanywhere-news/what-is-the-open-rate-of-sms-in-2021/) are opened and read within three minutes.
* Thinking about situations or problems not relevant to the immediate task of driving
* Pain and discomfort
* Eating, drinking or smoking behind the wheel

Beware of seeking distraction because you are bored or tired. It won’t help your alertness or concentration – it will just disrupt your focus even more. Pull over, take a break, have a drink, move around, chat to someone. These things can help restore your focus for the next leg of your journey.

**Penalties**

If you are found using a handheld mobile phone while driving, you can be given a fine of £200 and six penalty points.

However, any distraction can leave you open to prosecution for Dangerous Driving, Careless and Inconsiderate Driving, Failure to Be in Proper Control of the Vehicle, or Driving without Due Care and Attention, all of which carry far higher penalties.

The highest penalty, however, is that you could kill or injure yourself or someone else. Drivers causing collisions which hurt or kill others may end their careers, go to prison – and often live guilt and trauma for the rest of their lives.

Is anything worth that risk?

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)