Tips to Avoid Distracted Driving

All drivers may experience distracted driving (DD). How many of you have ever driven down the road and suddenly realized you cannot remember anything about the last two to three miles or have rubbernecked at an accident through the passenger-side window while in moving traffic? Events, such as texting, map reading, talking on the phone, changing the radio dial, reaching for an object, fishing around in a bag, personal grooming and similar activities, result in thousands of DD crashes daily in this country and internationally.

Considerations
Do you still drive by the old rule of a car length separation for every 10 mph or the 3-second rule separating vehicles? Since the average 4-door car measures 178 in. (14.8') in length, at 40 mph, 4 car lengths would be 60 ft (4' x 15'). However, at 40 mph, you travel 58.7 ft per second (fps), meaning that in the 2.9 seconds it takes for that eye glance (defined as looking away from the road ahead) to reach for something, you will have traveled 170 ft (58.7 fps x 2.9 s). More than enough time to be several feet under that slow-moving tractor-trailer rig you did not see.

In a 40-mph crash, a 100-pound girl who is not wearing a seatbelt will hit the vehicle dashboard with a force of 2.6 tons, and a 3,000-pound car crashing at 40 mph will experience a crash force of 80.28 tons. Survivability is not good. One Virginia Tech University study showed that 85% of crashes occur within 3 seconds of a driver’s distraction. Keep in mind that if a distraction event at 40 mph includes text messaging or a similar activity, the eyes can be off the road for 4.7 to 5.0 seconds, enough time to travel up to 294 ft, and the driver still has not started to react and begin braking. You certainly do not want to stray into another lane and meet someone else at 40 mph traveling in the other direction.

When we take these 3 seconds (170 ft), add up to 2 seconds’ reaction time (117 ft) and braking distance (66 ft. on dry pavement), your total distance traveled equals 353 ft. That is 50 ft longer than a football field. In the dynamic environment of a moving vehicle, that is a recipe for disaster. By the time your eyes and attention reacquire conditions ahead, it may be far too late.

Distracted Driving Avoidance Tips
Note: If driving as an employee, your organization’s driving policies take precedent.

• The most important tip is to recognize that engaging in unnecessary DD events will result in reduced focus on driving and will put you and your passengers at increased risk of a vehicular incident. Attempts at frequent eye movement between the road and your DD event will not statistically reduce your risk.

• Example events with mean (average) duration of eyes off forward roadway include texting (4.7 seconds (s)); other complex tertiary task (4.4 s); writing (4.2 s); use of calculator (4.4 s); map reading (3.9 s); dialing cell phone (3.8 s); reading (4.3 s); event with use/reach for other device (4.1 s); personal grooming (3.7 s); reach for object (3.0 s); look back at child in rear seat (3.7 s); event with smoking-lighting (1.8 s); event with external distraction (2.2 s); event with talk/listen to hands-free phone (1.8 s); put on/remove/adjust glasses or sunglasses (2.6 s); adjust instrument panel (2.8 s); interaction with occupant (2.1 s). These numbers are from various studies from the U.S. Department of Transportation, AAA, etc.

• If you text frequently, notify your counterpart(s) that you will be driving and not to text or phone you.

• In emergencies, family should know to call 911 or other family members since you cannot help while driving.

• If it is urgent for family or certain individuals to reach you, devise a procedure, such as three rings, hang up, wait two minutes and call again. Repeat once to allow time to pull over safely. Do not answer other phone calls; pull over to a safe location first if you need to check who has called. If not driving, you can pick up within the first cycle. Plan all business calls in advance and use rest stops to make those calls.

• Know your route in advance, and if available, preprogram your navigation system. Never use a handheld GPS device. If portable and designed for vehicles, it should be mounted within +30° of the driver’s look-forward position.

• Prepare the vehicle cab or yourself for driving. Secure loose objects, place groceries in the backseat and leave pets at home unless in a carrier. All occupants should be seat-belted and small children should be in rear car seats suitable for age and weight. As the driver, preset selections to avoid adjusting the climate control, radio or CD player once moving. Do not smoke as it guarantees frequent eye glances, and hot
ashes in the lap can really be a distraction. Eat something if appropriate before driving, and use only drinking cups suitable for the vehicle’s cup holders.

• According to a Utah University study, talking to a passenger is far safer than talking on a cell phone. Passengers, unlike cell phone callers, can make the driver aware of changing road conditions they may not see and can stop the conversation if traffic conditions warrant. Boisterous or numerous passengers can be major distractions, especially for younger drivers, and should be avoided or controlled.

• In poor weather or expected heavy traffic conditions, plan extra driving time.

• Distractions outside the vehicle are numerous. Be alert, well rested, do not use inhibiting drugs or alcohol and keep hands on the wheel. Drive defensively and expect the unexpected. Comply with recommendations in the previous section to minimize complications from simultaneous distractions from external and internal events.

• External DD examples include accidents; vehicle pulled over by law enforcement; construction work; electronic billboards; scenic views; looking for a numbered address or a specific street sign or business; being aggressively tailgated; abnormal driver behaviors; and erratic drivers.

• Maintain safe spacing or move to a less obstructed lane. Avoid the temptation to look in the rearview mirror when talking to a backseat passenger. If a child is restless, talk to him or her soothingly but do not turn around to look. If the child is in distress, locate a safe turnoff before attending to the problem.

• Inclement weather with reduced visibility or slippery surfaces will increase hazards associated with distractions. At night, wet surfaces and glare can hide lane lines, requiring more driver alertness. Recognize that DD events that divert attention from the road ahead, which were serious at 3+ seconds under favorable conditions, may now be equally hazardous at less than 2 seconds. If you must drive under these circumstances, slow down appropriately and increase spacing margins. Pretrip planning can reduce added stress or other concerns, such as having a full gas tank, season-specific tires in good condition and working wiper blades. Transportation Practice Specialty members note that “all-season” tires may save money but are inferior to winter tires in cold climates or to summer tires in the summer given four distinct seasonal locations.

**Summary**

DD events account for an ever-increasing percentage of crashes, many with fatal results. In a moving vehicle, inattention coupled with the inevitable force of time, physics and our own limitations is a serious hazard. These guidelines can significantly help reduce DD events. Remember to adhere to your organization’s driver policies when operating vehicles as an employee.

[Click here](#) for more information on preventing DD.

**ASSE in the News**

• **ASSE Offers Tips on Distracted Driving**
• **ASSE Transportation Group Concerned About Distracted Driving**
• **ASSE Transportation Group Offers New Website**
• **ASSE Urges to Address Distracted Driving**
• **Steering Clear of Distracted Driving**
• **Steering Clear of Distracted Driving with ASSE**

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