

Questions & Answers

1. Why is the National Safety Council calling for a ban on cell phone use while driving?

The National Safety Council is concerned about the increasing incidence of distracted motorists, as well as the proliferation of available wireless communications devices.

In 1990, there were 5 million wireless subscribers. Today, more than **270 million people are wireless subscribers in the United States**. According to a 2008 national survey, roughly eight out of every ten (81 percent) cell phone owners report they talk on their phones while driving and one out of every five (18 percent) report texting while driving. Multiple studies concluded that using a wireless communications device while driving is the most significant distraction that affects driving performance.

2. How serious is the risk?

Scientific studies have quantified the risk and arrived at essentially the same conclusion: A driver talking on a cell phone is four times more likely to be in a crash. Studies include epidemiological research that examined hospital admission records after crashes, simulator experiments and reports that link crashes to cell phone records.

3. Are hands-free devices safe?

Studies have shown little or no documented difference between the risk associated with hand held and hands-free devices. These studies indicate the distraction comes from the conversation, not holding the phone. One study found a higher risk associated with dialing a phone than with talking. However, that higher risk occurred only while the driver dialed the phone. The overall involvement of drivers in crashes and near crashes is much higher with cell phone conversations than with dialing because the length of conversations exposes drivers to the hazard for much longer periods.

4. Does NSC's policy allow for hands-free cell phones?

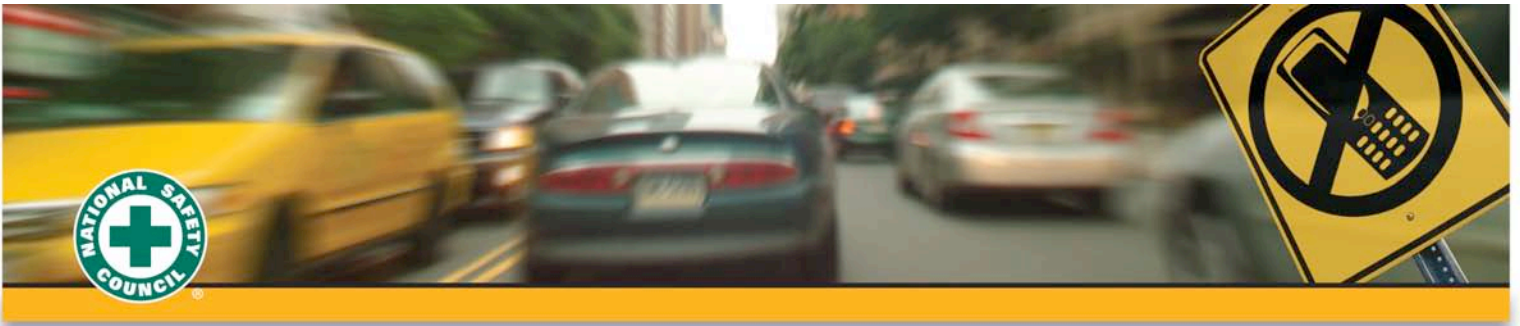
No. NSC does not support laws that permit hands-free devices because of significant research that shows these devices are no safer for drivers. Hands-free laws could mislead people into thinking that talking on a hands-free phone is safe.

5. What does NSC mean by 'texting'?

We define texting as the practice of typing, reading or sending messages (including text messaging, e-mail, web browsing and other applications) widely available on digital mobile phones and personal digital assistants (PDAs). One recent study found nearly 40 percent of teenagers and young adults surveyed had sent and received text messages while driving.

6. Many things people do in cars are distracting. Does NSC also want to ban eating, drinking and listening to the radio while driving?

Absolutely not. The relative risk, frequency and duration of cell phone use makes it much more likely to lead to a crash or near crash than most other behaviors drivers engage in. While there are a few actions that put drivers at higher risk, such as turning around and talking to back seat passengers, retrieving an item from the back seat or reading books and newspapers, drivers engage in these activities for short periods and much less frequently than they do cell phone conversations and texting.



7. How is a phone conversation any different than talking to a passenger? Does NSC want to ban passengers?

Cell phone and passenger conversations are very different in their level of distraction and effect on drivers. People engaged in cell phone conversations experience cognitive distraction -- that is, the brain cannot process conversations and driving tasks in a typical manner. Scientific studies have compared the risk of cell phone conversations to passenger conversations and determined that cell phone conversations pose a much higher risk.

With young, inexperienced teen drivers or even drivers in their 20s, however, this is not the case. Crash rates for teen drivers with teen passengers increase significantly with each additional passenger.

Distractions from cell phones and texting are also very significant for teen drivers. Teens are the most inexperienced drivers and also the group most likely to use a cell phone and, particularly, texting while driving. For teens, passengers, cell phone conversations and text messaging are all high-risk activities. That is why restricting passengers is a basic element of Graduated Driver Licensing practices and laws for teen drivers. Bottom line: Teen passengers and cell phones are both unsafe for inexperienced teen drivers.

8. Why ban cell phones and not other devices like GPS or DVD players?

Many states already have laws that prohibit drivers from viewing televisions and video or computer screens. The risk associated with watching a screen of any kind rather than watching the road is self-evident. Watching videos is fine for back seat passengers. It is a high-risk activity for drivers because it draws their focus from the driving task for extended periods of time.

GPS is a little different. Currently no scientific evidence has identified GPS systems -- either video maps or audible instructions -- as having a significant level of risk. GPS industry engineers have carefully considered the level of distraction to drivers when using the systems. For example, what is the length of time required for a person to look away from the road to view a map or instruction? Generally, GPS devices and many other in-vehicle controls are designed so they can be adjusted in only a few seconds. There is a risk associated with manually adjusting a GPS device while driving, and most systems are installed so that they cannot be adjusted when a car is in motion.

9. Can a cell phone ban be enforced?

As with all traffic enforcement measures, law enforcement leaders must be willing to commit time and resources to enforce new cell phone laws and establish best practices for enforcement. Law enforcement agencies have risen to the challenge of developing enforcement measures for other traffic safety laws largely deemed "unenforceable" when first introduced.

Laws such as those requiring the use of seat belts and child passenger seats, as well as laws concerning Graduated Driver Licensing for teen drivers and impaired driving, are today generally respected and successfully enforced by fines and interventions such as high-visibility law enforcement mobilizations.

10. Isn't it critical for drivers to be able to use phones in emergencies?

Yes, but a vehicle does not need to be moving to place a call. In an emergency, people should pull over before making a call. There may be instances in which a person truly needs to call 911 while driving and NSC believes exceptions are appropriate for such emergencies.