



## Mental Distraction Myth Busters

Misconceptions persist about the dangers of driving while talking on hands-free cell phones. Here are some of the most common myths:

**Myth: A hands-free device eliminates the dangers of cell phone use while driving**

**Fact:** Hands-free devices offer no safety benefits because they do not eliminate mental distraction. The brain cannot process two mentally complex tasks at once and, as it switches from a cell phone conversation to driving and back again, the brain becomes so overloaded that drivers can miss seeing up to 50% of their driving environment.

**Myth: If a driver's eyes are on the road at all times then he/she is safe**

**Fact:** The problem is the driver "looks but does not see." Distracted drivers experience what researchers call inattention blindness – similar to tunnel vision. Drivers look out the window, but their brains do not process everything necessary to safely monitor their surroundings. When a driver is talking on a cell phone, the brain prioritizes the phone conversation first and the attention for driving becomes secondary.

**Myth: A phone call is not as bad as other distractions in the car**

**Fact:** There are other activities that are more dangerous for drivers such as turning around to reach for an object in the back seat or rummaging through a purse. However, these distractions typically last just a few seconds because drivers realize the risk and the actions are short lived. Cell phone conversations often are longer because drivers do not realize they are mentally distracted. The longer a call, the longer the exposure to risk.

**Myth: If cell phone use while driving is mentally distracting, then drivers also should not talk to other passengers**

**Fact:** Some passenger conversations can be distracting to drivers such as intense conversations or arguments. But adult passengers often actively help drivers by monitoring and discussing traffic. Adult passengers can serve as helpful co-pilots. They tend to suppress conversation when the driving environment becomes demanding. Passengers can see the roadway; callers cannot.

The problem is the driver "looks but does not see."

A close-up photograph of a hand turning a silver knob on a car's radio. The radio face is visible with buttons for 'RADIO', 'MEDIA', and 'SEEK TRACK'. The background is a blurred view of the car's interior.

### **Myth: Other drivers have problems talking on cell phones and driving, but I can handle it**

**Fact:** According to a study done by the University of Utah, 98% of the public is incapable of performing two mentally demanding tasks at once without incurring substantial costs in performance. Only 2% of people have the ability to multitask without performance problems, and they perform at an “extraordinary” level. These are the kinds of people you want as “Top Gun” pilots.

In addition, you may trust yourself. But do you trust all other drivers around you? A substantial percentage of other drivers are distracted, fatigued, or impaired by alcohol and medications. Any of these drivers could do an unexpected risky action at any time. Drivers talking on phones are less capable of spotting hazards and taking evasive actions if needed.

### **Myth: Listening to the radio is as mentally distracting as talking on a cell phone**

**Fact:** Listening to music is not as mentally demanding because it is not a two-way conversation in which the brain needs to think of a response. Listening to music does not require as much thinking.



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