



Don't be driven to distraction

Ever since the automobile was first invented, there have been distractions that can pull the driver's attention away from the task at hand. In the past, those distractions were limited to people inside and objects outside the vehicle, such as animals, pedestrians, traffic, and road conditions. However, modern technology has provided new distractions to the driver: music and DVD players, cell phones, laptops, tablets, GPS devices, etc. Recent studies show that even if a driver uses hands-free technology to access these devices, they are still a distraction hazard.

It's not just the devices themselves, but the effect they have had on our lifestyle and physiology. Modern technology is changing the way our brains work. Studies have shown that over the past few generations, our attention span has decreased. We now require constant stimulation such as music, conversation, or visual diversions. And improvements in communication mean that, even when we're in a vehicle, we can never really "turn off" from the stresses of everyday life.



*Drivers who take their eyes off the road for more than two seconds double their risk of a crash.**

No matter how good we think we are at multi-tasking, we all have a limited capacity to process the information received by our senses. As the amount of sensory information increases, it becomes more difficult for the brain to process that information. We may believe we're multi-tasking, but we're just reducing our ability to pay attention to each task.

If your brain becomes overloaded with sensory information, it can lead to inattentive blindness. Because you're concentrating on something that demands your full attention, your brain can't process other information received from your senses. So, you may not see something that is right in front of you.

Types of distractions

Anything that takes your full attention away from driving can be considered a distraction. In general, there are four types of distractions.

Visual—A visual distraction occurs when a driver looks at anything other than the road ahead of them. Visual distractions are not limited to exterior items such as billboards or scenery; it also includes interior visual distractions, like adjusting the seat or steering wheel.



A driver who uses a cell phone is four times more likely to be in a collision than a driver who is focused on the road.*

Audible—An audible distraction can include someone talking to you either in person or on the phone, listening to the car radio or a music player, or paying attention to noises outside of the vehicle.

Physical—A physical distraction can happen when a driver performs an action that is not related to driving and that action causes them to remove a hand from the steering wheel. This can include drinking a coffee or reaching for something close by.

Psychological—A psychological distraction occurs when a driver is thinking about something not related to driving the vehicle. Those thoughts are usually related to stressful situations at home or at work.

Preventing distracted driving

We may never be able to remove completely the distractions of modern life while we're driving. However, there are some things we can do to lessen them. The most important one is to be aware that our attention needs to be on the road. In addition, there are things you can do before driving and while driving to limit your distractions.

Before driving

- **Allow for plenty of time**—We've all been in the situation where we're running late because we've left late. Most of us try to save time by multi-tasking while we drive. If you give yourself extra time in the morning to get ready, you can eliminate this problem.
- **Pre-trip inspection**—Checking your vehicle before you get in will help you identify a potential problem before it's too late.
- **Map it out**— Before travelling, map out your route or destination first. Put your travel information into your GPS while you're still parked.
- **Be comfortable**—Before putting the car in gear, make sure you're in a comfortable sitting position. Adjust the temperature controls, mirrors, and steering wheel, and set up your music (find your favourite radio station or plug in your MP3 player).



At highway speed, a driver sending a simple text message travels the length of a football field without looking at the road.*

- **Keep it clean**—Things like pop cans, wrappers, coffee cups, or sports equipment can all become a distraction by moving or rolling around on the floor. By cleaning your car, you can limit this distraction.

While Driving

- **Use hands-free devices**—In Ontario, it's against the law to use hand-held communication and entertainment devices while driving. Although hands-free devices are permitted, the best practice is not to make or receive any phone calls while operating a vehicle. Let all phone calls go directly to your voicemail.
- **Refuse to answer emails or text messages**—Each time you read a text or an email, you're taking your eyes off of the road for a minimum of 4 seconds. By not looking at your text messages or emails while driving, you will reduce a possible distraction.
- **Eat, drink, and groom at home**—Give yourself the time to eat, drink, and do your personal grooming at home before you get into your vehicle. Driving should be your main focus.
- **Stay relaxed and alert**—It's important to stay relaxed and alert while driving. Stress and fatigue can lessen your ability to react.

By following those best practices regularly, you will be able to reduce distractions, focus more on the task of driving, and identify any potential hazards that may arise during your trip. For more information on distracted driving, see our poster on pages 12 and 13.

*"Driving requires your full attention," website of the Ontario Ministry of Transportation, accessed May 12, 2014, <http://www.mto.gov.on.ca/english/safety/distracted-driving/index.shtml>