

Driven to distraction

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It's well-known that using a cell phone while driving can lead to motor vehicle crashes. New research — presented at the Pediatric Academic Societies (PAS) annual meeting in Boston — shows that even anticipating calls or messages may distract drivers, increasing the risk of a crash.

Jennifer M. Whitehill, PhD, postdoctoral fellow at Harborview Injury Prevention and Research Center at the University of Washington, and her colleagues sought to determine whether compulsive [cell phone](#) use is associated with [motor vehicle](#) crashes. They enlisted undergraduate students to complete the Cell Phone Overuse Scale (CPOS), a 24-item instrument that assesses four aspects of problematic cell phone use: 1) frequent anticipation of calls/messages, 2) interference with normal activities (e.g., impacting friends/family), 3) a strong emotional reaction to the cell phone and 4) recognizing problem use.

The 384 students also took an online anonymous survey that included questions about driving history, prior crashes while operating a vehicle, and items assessing risk behaviors and psychological profile.

"Young drivers continue to use cell phones in the car, despite the known risk of crash. We were interested to explore how cell phone use contributes to distracted driving and to begin to understand the relationship between the driver and the phone," said senior author Beth E. Ebel, MD, MSc, MPH, FAAP, director of the Harborview Injury Prevention and Research Center and associate professor of pediatrics at University of Washington.

Results showed that for each 1 point increase on the CPOS, there was an approximately 1 percent increase in the number of previous motor vehicle crashes. Of the four dimensions of compulsive cell phone use, a higher level of call anticipation was significantly associated with prior crashes.

"We know it is important to prevent young drivers from taking their hands off the wheel and eyes off the road to use a cell phone," Dr. Whitehill said. "This study suggests that thinking about future cell phone calls and messages may be an additional source of distraction that could contribute to crashes."

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