

Middle-aged drivers admit to using cellphones while driving, even with children in the car

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A new study published in Journal of Transport & Health reveals that middle-aged drivers are at higher risk of crashes because they use their

cellphone regularly while driving. The research reveals that most drivers admit to using their cellphones regularly while driving, even with children in the car; drivers also feel pressured to answer work calls while driving.

The authors of the study, from the University of California San Diego, are now working with companies to teach employees about the risks associated with distracted driving, and show them ways to avoid using their phones while driving.

More than one in four car accidents are caused by cellphone use, according to the National Safety Council (NSC). A driver's crash risk is eight times higher if they are texting on a cellphone and, despite seeming safe, talking hands-free makes drivers four times more likely to be involved in a crash..

Previous studies on distracted driving have mainly focused on teenagers and young people, and programs targeting this group have decreased their number of crashes. Although older adults often use their cellphones while driving too, there is a shortage of studies on this age group.

The researchers modified a survey they had done previously with college students, to find out more about the driving behaviors of middle-aged adults (30-64 years old). 715 people completed the survey; 75% of them were women and their average age was 46. The survey asked participants questions about their driving behaviors and cell phone use, such as whether they text at red lights or in traffic, how often they use cellphones (handheld or hands-free), and whether they use a cellphone while driving with children in the car.

The results revealed that 75% of participants talk on cellphones hands-free, and almost 90% of them consider themselves capable or very capable drivers while doing so. Less than 30% of participants knew that

talking on a hands-free phone increases the risk of crashing to the same degree as driving at the legal alcohol limit.

"Unfortunately, we weren't surprised to see that relatively few people understand the risks of distracted driving," said Jessa Engelberg, lead author of the study. "What we were really interested in was whether factors like children and work obligations had an effect on people's behavior."

The researchers were surprised to find that the presence of children in the car did not affect drivers' behavior. Drivers continued to use their mobile phones with children as passengers, even with older children that were more likely to copy their driving behavior.

"One of the things we were worried about in the 30-64 age group was whether they would use their phones while driving as frequently as the teenagers and young adults did, especially with kids in the car," said Professor Linda Hill, co-author of the study. "The thing about middle-aged drivers is their passengers tend to be minors, and there's an issue of modeling if the adults are teaching them how to drive."

More than one-third of participants said they felt pressured to answer work calls while driving, suggesting that there is an opportunity to reduce distracted driving by working with companies to educate both the employers and their employees.

The team took the information from the survey and used it to design an intervention, funded by the California Office for Traffic Safety. By working with companies, the team has trained almost 7,000 employees to reduce distracted driving since the survey. So far, the results have been positive: a sample of employees who have taken part in a one-hour class reported being less likely to text, more likely to put their phones in the trunk and more likely to ask people not to call while they're driving.

"The survey really helped us design something that would change behavior and we're excited we've been able to use it to make a difference," said Professor Hill. "We think our intervention should be more widely implemented. People need to hear information about the risks of distracted driving from different sources, like public health, law enforcement and family. We're now working to get the message out, and hope to set up a system where we train trainers around the country."

More information: "Distracted driving behaviors related to cell phone use among middle-aged adults," *Journal of Transport & Health*, Available online 10 June 2015, ISSN 2214-1405, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jth.2015.05.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jth.2015.05.002)

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