

A new roadway danger: Drivers chasing 'Pokemon Go'

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(HealthDay)—Pokemon Go is becoming a dangerous distraction for drivers who are using their cars to catch the battling critters in real-world locations, researchers report.

An analysis of Pokemon Go-related posts on Twitter found that a disturbing number of people are playing the game in their cars or on foot near traffic, said lead researcher John Ayers, a professor of [public health](#) at San Diego State University.

At least 14 crashes were attributed to Pokemon Go during a 10-day period in July, including one player who drove his car into a tree while playing, Ayers and his colleagues found.

"We see many reported cases of drivers slamming on the brakes to jump out in traffic and catch a Pokemon," Ayers said. "At the same time, we see many reports of near misses or even crashes where pedestrians walk into traffic not monitoring their proximity to the highway."

Pokemon Go is an "augmented reality" game in which players use their smartphones to look for digital creatures called Pokemon in real-world locations. Once caught, the Pokemon can fight using in-game gyms.

The game has received praise from health officials for getting sedentary folks off the couch, since players have to walk around if they want the most valuable Pokemon creatures in their collection.

But a random sample of 4,000 tweets collected during 10 days in July showed that many players are relying on motor vehicles to help them locate the creatures, Ayers said. Researchers scanned for tweets containing the terms "Pokemon," "driving," "drives," "drive" or "car," and also included news reports that included the terms "Pokemon" and "driving."

A full third of the tweets indicated that a driver, passenger or a pedestrian was distracted by Pokemon Go, which correlates to nearly 114,000 incidences reported on Twitter in 10 days.

About 18 percent indicated a person was playing and driving ("omg I'm catching Pokemon and driving"), and 11 percent indicated a passenger was playing ("just made sis drive me around to find Pokemon"). Another 4 percent indicated a pedestrian was distracted ("almost got hit by a car playing Pokemon Go").

The findings were reported Sept. 16 in the journal *JAMA Internal Medicine*.

"With Pokemon Go, there was a race among public health leaders to tout the benefits of increased physical activity, many forgetting that [motor vehicle crashes](#) are the leading cause of death among the group targeted by Pokemon Go," Ayers said.

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for people between the ages of 16 and 24,

according to the study. Young drivers are easily distracted; 59 percent of all crashes by young drivers involve distractions within six seconds of an accident, according to the American Automobile Association.

More information: For more on distracted driving, visit the [U.S. Department of Transportation](#).

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"Unfortunately, it comes as no surprise that people are playing Pokemon Go as they drive and walk," said Jonathan Adkins, executive director of the Governors Highway Safety Association. "Distraction for both drivers and pedestrians has been a constant issue in the smartphone age, and an app like this that provides incentives for people to change locations while playing inherently leads to more distraction."

Playing Pokemon Go is restricted at speeds greater than 10 miles per hour, Ayers and his colleagues noted.

However, "this is easily bypassed and does not provide any significant deterrent to play while driving," Adkins said. "Furthermore, even at low speeds, this action still takes away from your ability to pay attention to your surroundings, thus endangering yourself and others."

The game's maker, Niantic Inc., could make its speed restrictions even tougher, Ayers said.

Efforts made by *HealthDay* to reach Niantic for comment were unsuccessful.

"Game and phone makers should disable Pokemon Go and augmented reality games at driving speed and for a period after driving speed has been achieved, so players don't play at red lights," Ayers said. "Moreover, they should disable the game near roadways and parking lots."

Adkins said: "Though Pokemon Go is the first of its kind, it likely won't be the last, so it remains imperative for people to understand the dangers of driving with that level of distraction.

"This research goes to show that distraction remains a widespread problem and proves that driver phone usage is not just limited to texting or talking," he added. "It now also includes apps they're using while behind the wheel."

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