

Roadside Safety: Reduce distractions behind the wheel

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Despite the fact that automobiles are now designed with more safety features than ever before, the rate of traffic accidents and fatalities continue to rise.

The National Safety Council says safety improvement like crash-avoidance technology hasn't reduced accidents, and driver error is still to blame for many crashes — with distractions behind the wheel and impaired driving leading the way.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration says distracted driving claimed 3,450 lives in 2016 alone.

Distracted driving is defined as any activity that diverts drivers' attention from the road. This can include everything from talking to passengers to eating to fiddling with the car radio. However, distractions from technology have become especially alarming, particularly texting or reading phones while driving.

During daylight hours, approximately 481,000 drivers typically use cell phones while driving. The NHTSA says that removing one's eyes from the road for a mere 5 seconds when traveling at 55 miles per hour is like driving the length of a football field with your eyes closed.

Reducing distractions should be a priority for all drivers. Here are some suggestions, courtesy of Geico insurance and AAA Exchange.

- Store loose gear and other items that can roll around away from the driver's seat so you are not tempted to reach for them.
- Adjust mirrors, GPS maps, climate controls, music, and more before you put the car in drive.
- Use a mobile phone only for emergency purposes and only after pulling over to the side of the road. Avoid social conversations on the phone while driving.
- Limit the number of passengers you allow inside your car. The more passengers, the more distractions. This is especially true for young drivers.
- Eat food before getting in the car. Snacking while driving makes you less attentive to the road around you.
- Secure children and pets accordingly. Both should wear harnesses and not be given free reign to roam around the car.
- Try to focus only on driving while in the car. Leave the multitasking to when you're not behind the wheel.

Geico indicates that studies have shown people are limited in the amount of information they can process at any one time. Driving requires focus and an ability to react to a host of potential circumstances.

Distractions compromise drivers' ability to focus. Reducing distractions can considerably cut down on the number of motor vehicle accidents each year.