



People for Proper Policing in North Wales

Chatty Driving: Phones vs. Passengers

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By now most people know that **cell phones are a deadly distraction for drivers**. But what about chatting with passengers?

New research sheds light on the role that conversation — whether in person or on the phone — has on driving skill.

Researchers at the University of Utah found that all conversations are not created equal. There is something uniquely distracting about talking on the phone when you're behind the wheel; conversations with people inside the car are far less distracting to drivers. Unlike cell phone callers, chatty passengers instinctively stop talking when driving conditions change, and they offer an extra set of eyes to alert drivers to nearly-missed exits or erratic drivers.

"Passenger conversation is much safer than conversation on the cell phone," said **David Strayer, professor of psychology at the University of Utah** and the study's lead author. *"When you're in the same physical environment, you tend to adjust your discussions to the difficulty of driving. If driving becomes difficult, they stop talking or they point out hazards."*

To gauge the effect of cell phone conversation compared to in-person chats in the car, the researchers put 96 drivers in a simulator, instructing them to drive several miles down the road and pull off at a rest stop ahead. The drivers conducted the experiment while talking to a friend on a cell phone or while talking to a friend seated nearby. Nearly every driver riding with a passenger completed the task — sometimes the passenger alerted the driver to the approaching rest stop. But half of the cell phone chatterers missed the exit, according to the study, published in *The Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*. *"They drove right past the exit without even stopping or noticing,"* Dr. Strayer said.

All of the cell phone drivers were using hands-free headsets, debunking the idea that it's safer to talk on the phone while driving if you're not holding a handset, Dr. Strayer noted.

"In terms of risk, you're as likely to be in an accident talking on the cell phone as you are if you are legally drunk," Dr. Strayer said. *"I see a lot of cases where instead of missing an exit, someone doesn't see a stop sign or a stop light."*

To see the full study, go to <http://www.psych.utah.edu/AppliedCognitionLab/>

The PPP comments Thank you to the NYT's excellent e.mail service for this report and several others. We have all experienced the demands on one's attention that cellphones make in any situation. Is it worse than a cable connected phone?, could it be the radiation affecting our ability to multitask?. If you watch airline pilots on the radio to the tower they don't seem (fortunately!) to be as distracted. MORE RESEARCH is obviously needed.