



**50**  
Percentage that  
brain activity  
decreases when a  
driver is distracted

# Driven to Distraction

Even if you're a good driver, the stats can't be ignored: Multitasking behind the wheel is the deadliest thing you can do. Sadly, more and more young women are committing vehicular suicide.

By Kate Ashford

**C** → A lot of things go through your mind when you get behind the wheel of a car: *Will I be late? How bad is traffic? Should I have worn the other skirt?* But chances are, you're not consciously thinking about navigating a 4,000-pound hunk of metal through a sea of other fast-moving hunks of metal—not to mention unpredictable pedestrians. “Driving a car is the most complex thing the majority of people will do in their lives, unless they fly an aircraft,” says Dennis Doverspike, Ph.D., a psychologist at the University of Akron who studies driving behaviors. So you're concentrating pretty hard, right? Of course you are. Especially since you're also tuning the radio, chatting on your cell phone, noshing on a bag of chips, and applying eyeliner.

Even if you're not guilty of all that, plenty of others on the road are. Distracted driving is growing to such an extent that the U.S. Department of Transportation held a summit last year to address it. Car crashes are the leading cause of accidental death among otherwise healthy young women, and the number caused by driver inattention has risen 21 percent in the past five years. And, chillingly, more people are dying in these accidents. In fact, up to 56 percent of fatal crashes might have involved distraction, according to the

National Highway and Traffic Safety Administration. “It's a disturbing trend that threatens the safety of everyone on the road,” says U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood.

Why do so many intelligent, health-conscious women risk injury or death by multitasking at 60 miles per hour? Read on to find out and learn how not to be one of them.

## Chatting Your Life Away

As aggravated as we are when someone on a cell phone cuts us off in traffic, we're just as likely as they are to be chatting. A whopping 85 percent of women reported using mobile devices while driving, according to a survey by Nationwide Insurance. Yet the evidence that wireless and wheels don't mix is overwhelming. One recent study found that the brain scans of people using cell phones while driving showed 50 percent less activity than scans of people who were driving without distractions.

“One reason people put their lives on the line in this way is that they believe they're better than average drivers and multitaskers,” says David Strayer, Ph.D., a psychology professor at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. In other words, we think anyone else who does it is a moron, but we're good enough drivers to pull it off ourselves. Contributing to this belief is what experts call “inattention blindness,” which is when drivers are unaware of their impaired driving. So although you think you're cruising the highway like Danica Patrick as you gab with your mom, in reality, you're all over the road. You just aren't noticing.

Another possibility: You feel secure using a hands-free headset or wireless device. Two-thirds of people who use cell phones while driving think



it's safer to chat this way than on a handheld, but studies haven't found significant differences; drivers are distracted either way. Despite all these risks, only six states and Washington, D.C., have banned the use of handheld mobile phones behind the wheel, and no state bans all phones for all drivers.

of a football field at 55 miles per hour without looking."

Knowing that danger, why do we keep finger tapping away? One possible explanation is that we're wired to pay attention to the wrong thing. Research suggests we get a rush of dopamine—a mood-boosting chemical

that it's automated, and you decide that you can do other things at the same time. And the more you do that without crashing, the more likely you are to keep doing it. "You're repeatedly rewarded by not getting into an accident," Britt says. "But it just takes that one time to make you wish you hadn't done it."

**WHAT IS IT?**

**inattention blindness**

\in'ə-tən'shən blīnd'nēs\ n.

The tendency of drivers to be unaware of their own impaired driving.



**Eyes off the Road**

As dangerous as auditory interruptions are, a far more deadly habit is texting while driving. And teens aren't the only ones who are guilty: Thirty-nine percent of 18- to 30-year-olds and 15 percent of 31- to 44-year-olds cop to typing at the wheel.

In one recent study, texting on the road increased crash and near-crash risk by more than 20 times. "We had drivers take their eyes off the road for almost five-second intervals," says Tom Dingus, director of the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute in Blacksburg, Virginia, which conducted the study. "That's essentially driving the length

connected to our brain's reward center—when we hear the ping of an incoming text or phone call. It's extremely difficult to resist the urge to pick up the phone and see who's trying to get in touch with us when it gives us such instant gratification.

And then there are societal expectations. "A few years ago, it was normal to take a day to respond to an e-mail," says Thomas Britt, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Clemson University in South Carolina. "Today, you'd be viewed as not being conscientious."

Another part of the problem: Driving a car becomes rote, experts say. You do it so often

**Meals on Wheels**

It's not just technology that's at the root of our dicey driving behavior. "All the focus is on cell phones, but when we started digging into the stats, we found that eating was a huge part of distracted driving," says McKeel Hagerty, CEO of Hagerty Insurance, which compiled a list of the 10 most dangerous foods to eat while in the car.

In a survey, one in 10 women admitted that they'd had to swerve or hit the brakes while snacking behind the wheel. Another study found that drivers were almost twice as likely to crash when they were chowing down. Last year, a Houston woman was killed when she crashed head-on into a freeway barrier. Police found a plate of food on the front seat of her car and suspect eating was the cause of the crash.



**20**  
Times more likely you are to crash or nearly crash if you are texting while driving

**your body, in a crash**

When your car suddenly stops, your body continues to move at the speed you were driving until it hits something. Here's what happens to you during a high-speed front-end impact:

**your head**

Your brain crashes against the front of the inside of your skull and then rebounds and smacks into the back. At minimum, you have a headache. At worst, brain swelling and death.

**your neck**

The weight of your head whipping around pulls all the muscles in your neck (whiplash). That is, if your neck doesn't break.

**your heart**

If your heart swings too violently into the back of your breastbone, it tears off the aorta (the largest artery in the body), killing you. Or you can suffer a partially ruptured aorta or a bruised heart.

**your lungs**

Many people gasp just before impact, filling their lungs and making lung rupture more likely.

**your ribs**

Probably broken. Also a lung-puncture risk.

**your abdomen**

Your internal organs smash into the front of your body. Doctors are first concerned with your liver and spleen, because damage to these blood-rich organs can cause massive internal bleeding that can be fatal.

**your legs**

If there's enough force to drive the front end of your car into your knees, your thighbones snap.

FROM TOP: IAN MCKINNEL/GETTY IMAGES, EXPRESS-TIMES/LANDOV; BOSTON GLOBE/JON MAHONEY/LANDOV



What tops Hagerty's list of the most dangerous foods to eat in the car? Coffee. Not only are you likely to slosh it into your lap, but you could also scald yourself badly in the process (and possibly rear-end the car in front of you mid-course too). A coffee spill distracts us because it's such an immediate problem. Even though we know that a coffee stain or a burn isn't comparable to say, running a red light and getting hit by a truck, our bodies instinctively

it. Two-thirds of women wear heels while driving; experts point out that heels can get caught under the gas pedal and these kinds of shoes don't provide much traction.

**Mad Women**

Even if you're not talking on the phone or applying mascara, driving can be challenging for your brain. Women report higher levels of stress than men while driving in bad weather conditions, during interactions



37

Percentage of drivers who say stress makes them drive erratically

prioritize the steaming hot java in our laps as the bigger threat. Explains Britt: "Our brains almost aren't equipped to squash that impulse."



**Primp My Ride**

It's such a cliché—the woman applying mascara in her rearview mirror in the middle of rush-hour traffic. We're smarter than that, right? Um, no. One in five women say they beautify in the driver's seat (26 percent copped to doing their hair), and more than 3 percent report having been in an accident because of it.

One appearance-related hazard that doesn't involve multitasking: driving in the wrong shoes. According to a U.K. survey, about 10 percent of women admit they've crashed or nearly crashed because their shoe slipped off the pedal or got stuck under

with other drivers, and even while performing normal driving tasks like making turns, according to a study by University of Iowa researchers. That may contribute to the increasing incidence of road rage, which affects one in four female drivers. Women are just as likely as men to engage in risky and aggressive driving when they get mad on the road, Doverspike says. Not only that, but in one poll, almost half of drivers said they're more likely to lose concentration if they're stressed, and 37 percent said that stress makes them drive more erratically. Put it all together and you have a driving environment that can actually cause unsafe driving. Now that's scary.

# getting off the collision course

*Wondering how you can achieve some auto-immunity, especially if shortening your commute isn't an option? The first step is being aware of the risks. The second is preparing for them.*

> **If you constantly fiddle with the radio**, preset your stations, take CDs out of their cases, or cue up an iPod playlist before the engine is running. If you're a cell phone junkie, put your phone in the trunk so temptation is out of reach until you put the car in park. Or look into one of the new devices (like ZoomSafer) that automatically locks your phone's keypad when you start driving.

> **If you must eat in the car**, your best choices are temperature-neutral handheld foods that aren't going to make a mess—think a granola bar or a banana, not hot soup or a taco. And invest in a travel mug with a good leakproof seal for hot beverages such as coffee.

> **To avoid becoming a footwear fashion victim**, stash a spare pair of shoes in your car. The best kind to drive in have a thin sole (so you can feel the pedals), a nonskid bottom, and a heel low enough that you can rest the back of your foot on the floor. Moccasins, loafers, and slip-ons are all good options.

> **When you find yourself becoming agitated**, try taking some deep, slow breaths to calm your nerves. "In a stressful situation, our breathing is very rapid and shallow," says Elaine Masters, who founded Drivetime Yoga in Solana Beach, California, to educate drivers on being healthier and more relaxed behind the wheel. "Inhale for a count of seven, hold it for a few seconds, and exhale for a count of seven. Repeat that three or more times. It triggers the body's relaxation response very quickly."

> **It might also help to take a look at your life** and ask yourself if you're really so overscheduled that you have to eat, primp, and live your entire life in your car. "You have to prioritize," says Barbara Harsha, executive director of the Governors Highway Safety Association. And that just might prove to be a good thing on and off the road.

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