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Tough Call: What Canadians need To Know about the Hands Free Law

Taking calls, sending and receiving texts or emails or fiddling with phones distracts drivers from concentrating on driving and their cars and can result in fatal accidents.

Currently, there is not a widespread Canadian law governing the use of cell phones while driving. However, a few provinces have taken the initial step to curb cell phone usage while driving. The provinces that have made it illegal to talk or text while driving are Quebec, Newfoundland, Labrador and Nova Scotia. In other words, if you are caught talking or texting while driving, you may face a potentially stiff fine and points on your driver's license.

The next province to officially ban the use of cell phones while driving is **Ontario**. Starting October 26, 2009 it will be illegal for drivers to talk, text, type, dial or email using hand-held cell phones and other hand-held communications and entertainment products.

Studies have found that distracted driving, especially with the **use of cellphones**, is as dangerous or worse than **driving under the influence of alcohol**.

Motorists chatting on hand-held or even hands-free cellphones are **preoccupied and distracted** and a distracted driver is a dangerous driver. Focusing on a text message or on a phone discussion incapacitates concentration that is better used on managing the car and where it is going.

Distracted driver's reaction times are substantially slower, their peripheral vision is obscured and their sense of hearing is reduced, it is like driving drunk.

Here are some facts to consider.

- There is no difference in the cognitive distraction between hand-held and hands-free devices. (Based on Simulator studies at the U. of Utah.)
- Cell phone use also contributed to an estimated 6 percent of all crashes, which equates to 636,000 crashes, 330,000 injuries, 12,000 serious injuries and 2,600 deaths each year. (Based on Harvard Center of Risk Analysis).
- 80 percent of crashes are related to driver inattention. There are certain activities that may be more dangerous than talking on a cell phone. However, cell phone use occurs more frequently and for longer durations than other, riskier behaviors. Thus, the no. 1 source of driver inattention is cell phones. (Virginia Tech 100-car study for NHTSA)

Dr. Donald Redelmeier, a University of Toronto researcher, studied cell phone records of 700 Toronto drivers who were involved in **crashes**, and found that talking on the phone made them four times more susceptible to driver error leading to accidents. Which is similar to driving under the influence of two or three alcoholic drinks.

Drivers will have a three-month education period meaning some may be caught but let off with a warning. Starting February 10, 2010, however, police will levy fines of up to \$500 for drivers caught using a prohibited hand-held device.

What is banned:

- Use of cell phones, even at a stop light
- Dialing
- BlackBerry use
- Texting
- Hand-held GPS, dash-mounted is allowed

Once the **OPP** enforces the new law, drivers caught by police will face fines of at least \$500 and demerit points. The only exception is that hand-held phones may be used to dial 911.

"There are collisions attributable to it, and some fatalities. So it is a huge concern," said OPP Deputy Commissioner Larry Beechey about distracted driving.

"We've all had near-misses. I'm just as guilty as anyone else. Hands-free or not, talking on the phone is cognitively distracting," explains **Dr. Suzanne Strasberg**, President of the Ontario Medical Association.

Cell phone bans for drivers are already in place in **about 50 countries**, including Australia, China, France, Kenya and Slovenia. More countries are expected to sign up as this becoming a global initiative.

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I was overjoyed to read this article. In the past few months I have been very close to being run down by the same woman with kids in her van and yakking on a cell phone. I see these people all the time and give no never mind the rights or lives of others. I trust that the OPP wil strongly enforce this much needed law.

Written by: **Josey Asprey**, from **Chatham, ON**

Tough Call: What Canadians need To Know about the Hands Free..

About time. BC should get on board! Commuting in Vancouver is taking your life into your hands. I've lost count of the number of people I see texting WHILE THEY DRIVE!

Written by: **Russell J.**, from **Vancouver**

Tough Call: What Canadians need To Know about the Hands Free..

This article makes the following claim :- ""There is no difference in the cognitive distraction between hand-held and hands-free devices. (Based on Simulator studies at the U. of Utah.)"" I AM ALWAYS ON GUARD WHEN I SEE ANOTHER DRIVER WITH A CELLPHONE GLUED TO THEIR EAR. WHAT GOOD IS THIS LAW IF THE DISTRACTED DRIVERS ARE USING HANDS-FREE SYSTEMS AND WE CAN NO LONGER TELL THAT THEY ARE DISTRACTED !!! ALSO DOESN'T IT MAKE SENSE TO ALLOW THE USE OF A TALKING HANDHELD GPS (SAT ON A CAR SEAT) WHICH HAD ITS DESTINATION ALREADY SET WHEN THE VEHICLE WAS STATIONERY. OTHERWISE WE ARE GOING TO SEE IDIOTS TRYING TO READ PAPER MAPS WHEN THEY ARE DRIVING AND THIS WILL BE A LEGAL ACTIVITY !!!!!

Written by: **James Mills**, from **Toronto**

Tough Call: What Canadians need To Know about the Hands Free..

I think that they need to take the next step of banning multiple people in vehicles, remove AM/FM radios, CD players as well. These all distract people while they are driving. There is a natural tendency to look at the person you are talking to. If the person you are talking to is in the back seat you are potentially turning around which is far more dangerous and distracting than using a hands free cell phone. I have had a bluetooth headset for as long as I have had a phone that supported it and a handsfree wired earpiece for a long time before that. Sure, a dash mounted GPS is allowed, but what about a GPS that is suction cupped to the windshield (not obstructing view)? Technically, that is not dash mounted so could be considered illegal. There is no need for this law to even exist. There are already laws on the books that could easily be put in place. Reckless driving? Dangerous driving? Why add more laws that are often poorly thought through when existing laws are more than capable of dealing with the problem?

Written by: **Michael**, from **Ontario**

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What is disappointing about this is the universality of the law doesn't do several things. It doesn't respect the reality that driver's skill is widely varied, or that people in general have different levels of ability to manage distraction. It doesn't deal with the people I watch on my daily commute who: - put on mascara at the stop light - eat bowls of cereal while driving south on Hwy. 10 - READ A NOVEL while driving - read an old-fashioned map, delivery invoice, work order etc As an ex-smoker, it doesn't touch on the complexities of lifting an open flame to the vicinity of your face while driving. We read about these ivory-tower professors who spend considerable amounts of taxpayer dollars to generate what are frankly intuitive results whose only use is to justify draconian laws. There may be no difference in the cognitive distraction between handheld and hands-free, but there certainly is between individuals and that degree of variability is probably a greater degree than the use of cellphones or not. (This is why we have graduated licensing, after all).

Written by: **Noel Mcleod**, from **Toronto**

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Unfortunately this new law in Ontario is more than useless because not only will it give a ""free pass"" to people who chat on their phone all the time and still remain distracted, the politicians will now stop paying attention to the problem because they have ""solved"" it.

Written by: **Brian**, from **Oakville**

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Good coverage and insightful piece. I am surprised that other media outlets aren't giving this more importance as it is around the corner. Today's drivers are faced with more distractions than ever before-- BlackBerry addicts and text-a-holics need to put things into perspective.

Written by: **Simon**, from **Newcastle**

Tough Call: What Canadians need To Know about the Hands Free..

Good article. Even with hands free cell conversation, I have been guilty as a texting, dialing and GPS-programming driver. I have decided to simply pull over and park to do these things.

Written by: **Russ**, from **Orangeville**

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