

Cellphones: the enemy of safe driving or simply misunderstood?

Research doesn't have a conclusive answer yet, so tell me where you side in this raging debate

Want to split your next dinner party into more alliances than a "Survivor" episode? Ask whether your guests think it should be illegal to talk on a cellphone while driving.

It's a touchy debate. And, while there are strong feelings pro and con, unfortunately no side can be proven the clear winner.

You see, here's the dilemma. According to a report a couple of years back in The New England Journal of Medicine, talking on a cellphone is nearly as risky as drinking and driving. In fact, the study said the risk of a collision quadruples when a driver is talking on a cellphone!

But other studies indicate that talking on a cellphone is no more distracting than talking to a passenger.

Cellphone proponents will tell you that cellphones increase safety, as they can be used to report disabled vehicles, accidents, hazardous road conditions, and medical emergencies. (The fact that some U.S. emergency response



**Road
Wise**

**Paul
Allen**

networks have been disabled by receiving over 100 "911" calls for the same emergency is another story.)

They also say that you can use them to call ahead when you're running late and that keeps you from speeding to your destination! Others suggest that our mobile society means that more and more people are using their vehicles as offices and to ban cellphone use in vehicles would be an unreasonable imposition on business.

Not enough research

There's even a debate within the debate. What about hand-held versus hands-free cellphones? Here again, some research indicates little or no crash risk difference between using one

or the other model. Other research "tentatively" indicates hands-free models are safer.

Obviously, we have a problem. Cellphones are a relatively new addition to the traffic safety mix, and we simply don't have enough research to prove whether they are a risk or not.

But that doesn't stop people from having strong opinions about the issue.

Why are cellphones such a hot button? We don't get angry watching people talk to one another in vehicles, so I ask you: why is it so irritating watching someone talk on a cellphone and drive?

One theory is that cellphones are so obvious. If a driver does something dumb while changing a CD, or reading scribbled directions on the back of a napkin, other drivers can't really see the cause of the distraction. But, if they do something dumb while on a cellphone, we can immediately zoom in on the culprit. Did you see what that moron just did? I tell you, those

cellphones are a menace!

Another theory is that many drivers talk on the phone for so long, which is also irritating. We know they can't possibly be concentrating as hard as they should be on the task at hand. So we (as helpful motorists sharing the road) fixate on them, watching with a critical eye and thinking "I told you so" with great satisfaction when they, like lots of other drivers we haven't even noticed, do something dumb.

Can you dial, talk and drive?

What do you think? Are cellphones really no more distracting than a passenger? If you think they are distracting, would you agree that hands-free models are a little safer? Or you do think the whole issue is literally an accident waiting to happen?

I personally don't agree that the distraction level of a cellphone is the same as talking to a passenger. I don't have to remember and dial a number to talk to my passenger, and my passenger hopefully has the smarts to be quiet if

something unexpected happens that requires my immediate driving attention. People on phones have no idea what I'm dealing with on the road. To me, that's a big difference.

But I'm interested in your opinions, and I'll share some of them next week, along with some safe driving tips for drivers on the phone.

I'm going to leave you with a story. I recently had three contractors call me about some work. All three called from a cellphone on the road, but only one said he called while stopped at a red light, and would I please be patient while he pulled over to finish our conversation.

Not only was he the smartest and the safest of the three, he was also one job richer.

Until next week, be **RoadWise**.

Paul Allen is Road Safety Manager for Manitoba Public Insurance. He would like to hear from you. His e-mail address is pallen@mpi.mb.ca and his mailing address is Room 824, 234 Donald Street, Box 6300, Winnipeg, MB R3C 4A4.

