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Driving Distracted: The impact your phone has on your driving

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By [Jason Fechner](#)

DES MOINES, Iowa -- It's a phenomenon most drivers are guilty of-- picking up that cell phone (or worse yet-- texting!) while behind the wheel of a moving car.



Jason in the driving simulator.

But before thinking that quick chat or quicker message is harmless, a recent report out of the University of Utah urges drivers to think again.

"Driving while on a cell phone is as bad as driving drunk," said Timothy Brown, a director of the National Advanced Driving Simulator on the University of Iowa.

He and other researchers there have performed hundreds of tests, tests which support the Utah-study's theory that using a phone from behind the wheel basically acts like two or three alcoholic beverages.

That's a scary proposition, considering that eight-percent of all drivers are on the phone while driving, according to the Utah study.

To try to test the theory, researchers at the University of Iowa invited me to test his driving while using a cell phone.

The test measured his ability to drive at 45 mph, abide by all traffic signals and signs, all while answering-and-placing calls and pointing out pedestrians on the road.

"It's as realistic as we can make a simulator," Brown said.

The NASA-like orb houses a late-model Chevy Malibu. Movie screens completely surround it and reflect multiple projectors, all to make the simulation as real as possible.

After a 20-minute test, Brown and his research team graded my abilities to handle the tasks.

"You did... fairly well," Brown said. "You were able to answer the phone and make the phone calls."

But that's all the driver was able to manage. Researchers calculated his driving ability was cut-down by half, as Fechner only managed to point out approximately 15 of the 30 digital pedestrians on the roadway.

"You didn't do so good on finding the pedestrians," Brown said. "You were a little over 50% and that's not near the top."

The study indicates that simply talking on the phone leads to a 30% reduction in reaction time. Fechner's score was nearly twice as bad.

That means he would need twice the stopping distance if something was in the roadway, or that he would need to drive at half the posted speed limit to stay as safe as he would typically be leaving the phone off.

"That was really surprising to me," Fechner said. "I use my phone [while driving] all the time and have never thought much of it. To do that badly... well, let's just say I was happy it happened in a simulator and not out on the street."

Text messaging, according to the National Safety Council, takes a driver's eyes off the road 40% more often

than if no text-messaging were involved.

Brown hopes those statistics, and the growing number of fatalities tied to cell phone related accidents in the U.S. each year (2,500 in 2005), will help drivers focus on the road, more than their cell phone's ring.

"In the real world, you don't know when the ball's going to bounce out in front of you and the kid's going to chase after it," Brown said, "or when the car in front of you is going to slam on its brakes to stop for a squirrel."



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