

Driving? Your Phone Is A Distraction Even If You Aren't Looking At It

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I was in the car with a friend recently when she pulled up to a stoplight, picked up her phone and replied to a text. I gave her the side eye. *What?* she glared back. “I only use my phone when we’re stopped.”

“OK, fine,” I said. But, I wondered, is it?

We all know that it’s dangerous to text while driving, but our phones have become [overlords that demand our constant attention](#). In the car, I limit my phone use to things I can do hands-free — talking and listening to preloaded playlists — and assumed this made me safer. But I may be fooling myself. Research has found that when it comes to distracted driving, what your eyes and hands are doing is only part of the issue — [what your mind is doing is at least as crucial](#). Before you can reduce the risks of cellphone use while driving, you need to understand the nature of distraction itself.

But putting down the phone and talking only via a hands-free system in the car doesn’t necessarily solve the distraction problem, said David Strayer, a psychologist at the University of Utah. Strayer’s research has found that drivers can get a sort of “tunnel vision” when their minds are focused elsewhere. People can enter this state during a phone conversation, whether or not they’re holding a phone, Strayer said. “There’s something like 35 studies now trying to compare handheld to hands-free, and they find that you’re impaired with both,” he said. “There really isn’t a safety advantage to one over the other.” Strayer’s research [testing volunteers in a driving simulator](#) found that people drove more sluggishly and had delayed reaction times when talking on the phone. Although they were different from the impairments experienced by people in the study who drove in the simulator while legally drunk, they were just as dangerous.