

In today's overwhelmingly busy society, with ever increasing demands on our personal and professional time, learning to juggle multiple tasks at once is something we all must face on a daily basis. While it is not clear whether or not multitasking is effective or if it costs more time than it saves, multi-tasking while driving has sparked a national debate about distracted driving and the latest statistics prove that not focusing on the road can be deadly.

One of the most widespread forms of distracted driving, cell phone usage, has some alarming statistics. According to a Carnegie Mellon study, driving while using a cell phone reduces the amount of brain activity associated with driving by 37 percent, and a report from the National Safety Council reported that 28 percent of traffic accidents are caused by people talking on cell phones or sending text messages.

"Stopping distracted driving is a major initiative that we are undertaking, and one that we believe will make our roads significantly safer. While there are many forms of distracted driving, an obvious distraction for most people is using a cell phone while driving," said LaHood. "We are working with states across the nation to pass legislation that authorizes law enforcement to stop and cite drivers who are texting while driving—one of the most dangerous forms of distracted driving."

Texting is of heightened concern because it combines three types of distraction – visual, taking the eyes off the road; manual, taking the hands off the wheel; and cognitive, taking the mind off the road. According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, drivers who use hand-held devices are four times as likely to get into crashes serious enough to injure themselves.

While cell phones are a major focus of the distracted driving campaign, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) is encouraging people not to do any other task while driving, as distracted driving is any non-driving activity a person engages in that has the potential to distract him or her from the primary task of driving and increases the risk of crashing. This can include using a cell phone, eating and drinking, grooming, tuning the radio or even talking to passengers.

In 2008, nearly 6,000 people lost their lives and an estimated 515,000 people were injured in police-reported crashes in which at least one form of driver distraction was reported on the police crash report.

To tackle this ever-increasing problem, NHTSA is focusing on ways to change the behavior of drivers through legislation, enforcement, public awareness and education—the same tactics that have curbed drinking and driving and increased seat belt use.

"Decades of experience with drunk driving and getting people to buckle up has taught us it takes a consistent combination of education, effective enforcement, a committed judiciary and collective efforts by local, state and national advocates to put a dent in the problem," said LaHood.

NHTSA's message is simple—"Put It Down"; and it's one that isn't going to go away anytime in the near future. With supporters ranging from President Obama to Oprah and legislation passing across the nation to discourage distracted driving, drivers will hopefully get the message loud and clear, just like with the drunk driving and seatbelt campaigns that have helped make the roads safer.

So the next time you are pressed for time, and you consider multitasking while you're driving, remember that the best multitasker knows that some things require your undivided attention, and you must know when you should put other things aside and focus your energy on the task at hand. Driving is definitely one of those times.