

A NEW SAFETY POLICY MAKES CANADIAN ROADWAYS JUST A LITTLE SAFER

Cellphones and Driving Don't Mix

We've all used the daily commute to get a phone call out of the way at least once – if not nearly every single day. Still, despite it being common practice, statistics say approximately three-quarters of Canadians believe cellphone use while driving is hazardous. That's not exactly breaking news considering the amount of media coverage cellphone use has received lately. But look a little deeper into the subject and you may be surprised, if not downright shocked.

When you dial home to remind your spouse that your son needs a ride home from hockey practice, you probably don't equate your driving ability with that of a drunk driver. But you are wrong. "It's actually the equivalent of being impaired," says Dr. Louis Francescutti, founder of the Coalition for Cellphone-Free Driving. "There are studies where they've actually put people in simulators and fed them alcohol, tested their driving ability and then did the same thing with people talking on cellphones. There's a very strong correlation." Francescutti, one of Canada's foremost injury prevention advocates, is an emergency physician in Edmonton's Royal Alexandra Hospital and a professor at the University of Alberta's Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry. He says misconceptions about the use of mobile communication devices are common, citing the supposed advantages of hands-free phones and headsets as a prime example.

"It has absolutely no difference whatsoever. It's the conversation itself that's the distracter," says Francescutti. "People ask 'what's the difference between talking on a cellphone and talking to another passen-

ger?' and the difference is that a passenger adjusts the conversation based on traffic flow, speed, weather conditions etcetera, as opposed to somebody who is on the other end of the line."

For years now, the information has been piling up. Organizations ranging from Harvard University to the city of Grande Prairie to corporations like Exxon have launched their own studies, all coming up with facts that point to one conclusion: cellphone use and driving don't mix. A recent study conducted by Exxon determined that drivers



who are talking on a cellphone take three times longer than impaired drivers do to activate the brakes, and show a reduced ability to maintain lane position in heavy vehicles.

That's no surprise to Francescutti, whose Coalition for Cellphone-Free Drivings counting an increasing number of high profile companies such as Halliburton, Schlumberger and Sterling Crane among its safety-minded membership. Finning (Canada) is one of the newest members, and according to Tom Petras, Finning's Environ-

Health and Safety Manager, joining the coalition made perfect sense.

"We always reflect on our core values and safety is a value that influences everything we do," says Petras. "What really prompted us was that there's an endless number of studies that keep coming out on the risks of cellphone use while driving. It's unbelievable." Finning has now banned the use of all wireless communications devices by employees and onsite personnel while driving motor vehicles. (The company makes an exception to this ban for drivers on logging and mine roads where frequent calls are necessary to prevent collisions with logging and mining trucks.) Violation of the policy can result in discipline up to and including termination of employment – but Petras doubts such measures will be needed.

"The feedback has been really positive thus far," says Petras. "It sounds contrary but we've talked to people who say productivity actually goes up because memory and recollection of phone calls degrades when they're trying to drive and take a call." He points to a recent press release from AMEC, a global engineering firm that polled its employees one year after implementing a similar ban.

Despite some skepticism at first, more than 95% of employees reported no decrease in productivity at all. In fact, 83% have now reduced or quit using cellphones while driving outside of work hours as well. And that's something both Petras and Francescutti hope to see with Finning employees.

"It's the same sort of attitude and philosophy people should have in their private lives," says Francescutti. He adds that the pressure you might feel to answer your phone can be eased by changing the outgoing voicemail message to indicate that you may be unavailable simply because you're driving at the time. "Don't put yourself in a situation where you're tempted to answer," says Francescutti. "Let it ring if need be. There's no phone call that's worth a human life." ■