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Photo: National Alliance for the Advancement of Prevention Initiatives

Cell Phone Distractions May Contribute to Increased Traffic Congestion

(Jan. 10, 2008) A new study from the University of Utah concludes that cell phone use – even hands-free models – contributes to a slowing of traffic, causing a general malaise to traffic conditions and an increase in commute times.

The university's Traffic Lab and a team of researchers devised a study involving 36 university students. Each student drove through six 9.2-mile-long freeway scenarios in low- to high-density traffic at speeds that resembled driving on an interstate highway.

The drivers used a hands-free phone during half their trips and no phone in the other half. They were told to obey posted speed limits and use turn signals but the rest of the driving decisions were up to them.

What researchers found is that when the drivers were distracted by a phone conversation, they made fewer lane changes, drove slower and took longer to get where they are going.

The study found that in medium- and high-density traffic drivers:

- were about 20 percent less likely to change lanes;
- spent about 25 to 50 seconds longer following slow-moving vehicles before changing to an open lane;
- drove about 2 mph slower than the undistracted drivers, and
- took 15 to 19 seconds longer to complete the 9.2 mile trip.

As many as 10 percent at a time

Those delays can add up, especially in light of studies that suggest as many as 10 percent of U.S. drivers are using a cell phone at any one time.

The study's scientists assert that the general reaction time of cell phone users is less attuned to traffic congestion than those drivers who don't use phones while driving.

The California Highway Patrol has found that cell phones were among the more prominent distractions in accidents caused by inattentive drivers.

Starting July 1, it will be illegal in California to operate a cell phone while driving unless the device is hands-free. The University of Utah study suggests that the new law won't reduce the distraction caused by using cell phones while operating a car.

Any driver caught using a cell phone without a hands-free adapter will be fined \$20 for the first offense and \$50 for subsequent infractions. Minors under 18 will be restricted from using cell phones at all while driving.

– *From reports in Reuters and the San Diego Union-Tribune.*

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