

## **Study: Even hands-free devices prove too distracting for drivers**

*By Nathalie Dortonne*

*Staff writer*

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Myklaina Pierre-Louis prepares for the worst.

The first thing the 21-year-old does when she steps in her gray Honda is turn on the hands-free option on her phone.

"I don't text and drive," said Pierre-Louis, a University of Florida psychology junior. "You should always be aware of yourself and other drivers."

Pierre-Louis said she uses a hands-free device to make phone calls so she can avoid getting into an accident while driving.

But a new study from the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety shows hands-free devices are not always the safest options for drivers.

The study found that mental distractions exist even when drivers keep their hands on the wheel and their eyes on the road.

In 2012, a total of 1,317 wrecks occurred in Alachua County, according to the Florida Highway Patrol. Electronic communication devices were responsible for 54 crashes, with two crashes blamed on texting.

From January 2013 to May, 434 car accidents occurred in Alachua County, the FHP reported. Electronic communication devices were responsible for 15 crashes, with one crash blamed on texting.

FHP spokeswoman Sgt. Tracy Pace said anytime you're doing something other than paying attention to your driving, it becomes a physical and mental distraction.

“Whether you're trying to dial your phone, sending a text message or dealing with your children in the backseat of the car ... you need to pay attention to your driving and your driving only,” Pace said.

Pierre-Louis said holding a phone offers more distractions than a hands-free device because you have to balance holding the phone and the steering wheel.

“I only use my phone when I really need to and when a call comes through,” she said. “Most, if not all text messages can wait for an answer. If it was an emergency, somebody would have called.”

Chuck Hamby, the public relations manager for Verizon Wireless in Florida, said drivers should pull over if they have to answer a call or text message.

“The safest option is don't do it,” Hamby said. “Verizon says pull over. Make that call. Nothing is worth your safety.”

Hamby said Verizon offers an app called “safely go” that limits cellular distractions for drivers. The app responds to text messages with an auto-reply so they can concentrate on the road. The app can be turned off when the person is a passenger.

“The driver has to accept responsibility for that vehicle,” Hamby said. “You should concentrate on driving.”

Hamby said multitasking while driving is the “stupidest thing you could ever do.”

“People still feel that they can put on makeup, eat, and do all sorts of things while they are driving, and they should not do those things,” he said.

The study found that even when a driver's eyes are on the road and hands on the wheel, sources of cognitive distractions cause significant impairments to driving such as suppressed brain activity, increased reaction time, missed cues and decreased visual scanning.

Researchers used the results to rate the levels of mental distraction drivers experienced while performing common tasks. Tasks such as listening to the radio ranked as a category “1” level of distraction or a minimal risk. Talking on a cellphone, both handheld and hands-free, resulted in a “2” or a moderate risk. Listening and responding to in-vehicle, voice-activated email features increased mental workload and distraction levels of the drivers to a “3” rating or one of extensive risk.

FHP Lt. Mark Boatright said even though hands-free devices are safer alternatives, they still present dangers for drivers.

Boatright suggests that drivers who have to make calls stop their vehicle in a safe and lighted location, such as a rest area or public lot where they are completely off the road.

John Walls agreed.

Walls, who is the vice president of CTIA — The Wireless Association, a nonprofit organization that represents the wireless communications industry, said drivers should pull into a lighted, safe area to make a phone call.

He said drivers should keep calls limited to as short a time as possible and avoid making emotional or stressful calls.

“The first thing (the driver) has to decide when it comes to talking is ‘Is the call urgent?’ ” Walls said. “The best decision quite often is to let your phone go to voicemail.”

The AAA suggests that drivers limit the use of voice-activated technology to core driving-related activities such as climate control, windshield wipers and cruise control, disable voice-to-text technology, and educate other vehicle owners about the responsible use and safety risks for in-vehicle technologies.

“You still (have) divided attention even if you're hands-free,” Boatright said. “You're not paying 100 percent attention to your driving.”

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