

Vehicles & Bicycles - Sharing the Road

Distracted Driving

Today's column reviews rules of the road that are sometimes misunderstood and go over facts and the law about distracted driving.

Drivers do not always understand how bicycles fit on the road and how the law affects drivers and bicyclists. The law says a bicycle rider is subject to the provisions applicable to and has the same rights and duties as the driver of any other vehicle, except provisions which by their very nature don't apply or when the vehicle code says otherwise. So it is lawful to ride a bicycle in the travel lane. Riders may also ride two abreast where they are not impeding traffic and there is enough room to pass.

However, the law says a bicycle rider going less than the normal speed of traffic must ride as close as practicable to the right side of the street (or the left side on a one-way street), unless the rider is passing another bicycle or vehicle, making a left turn, avoiding hazardous objects, parked or moving vehicles, bicycles, pedestrians, animals, surface hazards or other conditions, or the street is too narrow for a bicycle and vehicle to travel safely side by side;

So if you are driving and approaching a bicycle, remember the rider may be riding in the travel lane to avoid rocks, broken glass or slippery leaves, parked cars or because the street is too narrow for both a car and a bicycle. As a driver, it is your responsibility to provide enough clearance to safely pass the bicycle. A driver also must not open a vehicle door which interferes with traffic or with pedestrians and bicycles on sidewalks or shoulders.

Now let's look at texting, cell phone use and other distractions while driving. Distraction occurs any time you take your eyes off the road, your hands off the wheel and your mind off your primary task: driving safely. *All* distractions endanger driver, passenger and bystander safety. These types of distractions include:

- Texting or using a cell phone or smartphone
- Eating and drinking
- Talking to passengers
- Grooming
- Reading, including maps or using a navigation system
- Watching a video
- Adjusting a radio, CD player or MP3 player

Some facts about distracted driving:

- A study by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute (VTTI) indicated driver inattention led to 78 percent of all crashes and 65 percent of all near-crashes.
 - Another study by VTTI found that professional truck drivers who sent text messages while driving are 23 times more likely to crash or nearly crash than when not texting.
 - The risks, however, are not limited to text messaging. The likelihood of a crash quadruples while talking on a phone – with little to no improvement while using hands-free devices.
 - In 2009, 5,474 people were killed in crashes involving driver distraction, and an estimated 448,000 were injured. (NHTSA)
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- Teen drivers are more likely than other age groups to be involved in a fatal crash where distraction is reported.
 - Drivers who use hand-held devices are 4 times more likely to get into crashes serious enough to injure themselves.
 - Text messaging creates a crash risk 23 times worse than driving while not distracted.
 - Sending or receiving a text takes a driver's eyes from the road for an average of 4.6 seconds, the equivalent-at 55 mph-of driving the length of an entire football field, blind.
 - Headset cell phone use is not substantially safer than hand-held use.
 - Using a cell phone while driving, whether it's hand-held or hands-free, delays a driver's reactions as much as having a blood alcohol concentration at the legal limit of .08 percent.

Not convinced? For dozens of studies on the risks, visit the National Safety Council Website:

http://www.nsc.org/safety_road/Distracted_Driving/Pages/DistractedDrivingResearchandStatistics.aspx or www.distraction.gov

The state law regarding texting or using a cell phone while driving has changed. The law now allows such use only to summon emergency help if no other person in the vehicle is capable of summoning help, or by emergency providers, tow truck drivers and very few other cases. While the data shows it is not safe, use of a hands-free accessory is allowed for drivers 18 years of age or older.

To sum up, when you are driving share the road and concentrate on driving.