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Study: Driving While Using Handheld or Hands-Free Phone Raises Crash Risk

Drivers using cell phones while driving are four times as likely to get into crashes serious enough to injure themselves, according to a study by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

The study included 456 participants who owned or used a mobile phone and were treated in emergency rooms for injuries suffered in crashes from April 2002 to July 2004. Using phone records and interviews, the institute calculated the increased risk by comparing phone use within 10 minutes before an actual crash occurred with use by the same driver during the prior week.

The institute found that both handheld and hands-free phones increased the risk of crashes.

"This isn't intuitive," says Anne McCartt, vice president for research at the institute and an author of the study. "You'd think using a hands-free phone would be less distracting, so it wouldn't increase crash risk as much as using a hand-held phone. But we found that either phone type increased the risk. This could be because the so-called hands-free phones that are in common use today aren't really hands-free. We didn't have sufficient data to compare the different types of hands-free phones, such as those that are fully voice activated."

The study, which is published in the *British Medical Journal*, was conducted in the Western Australian city of Perth. The institute says U.S. phone companies were unwilling to make customers' billing records available.

The IIHS says another reason for conducting the study in Australia was to estimate crash risk in a jurisdiction where hand-held phone use is banned. It has been illegal while driving in Western Australia since July 2001. Still, one-third of the study's drivers said their calls had been placed on handheld phones.

In the United States, no federal law prohibits driving while using a cell phone, but New Jersey, New York, the District of Columbia, and Connecticut have barred handheld cell phone use while driving. Connecticut's law goes into effect October 1, 2005.