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Photo: Heather Schmaedeke for the U.S. Census Bureau

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## Nationwide Cell Phone Ban for Drivers Urged

SUNDAY, Jan. 11 (HealthDay News) -- A leading consumer safety organization is calling for a nationwide ban on drivers using all cell phones and other messaging devices.

While there are a few state and local laws banning drivers from using hand-held cell phones, the National Safety Council (NSC) believes it's time to make it unanimous.

The NSC plans to lobby in all 50 states and Washington, D.C., for laws that ban both hand-held and hands-free cell phone use as well as texting while driving. The council also plans to work with the U.S. government to develop incentive programs and sanctions that will force states to enact such laws.

"The problem is of an enormous order of magnitude, and it's only getting worse," said council president and chief executive officer Janet Froetscher. "We are at the point where the science is really clear that driving while you are on your cell phone is highly risky."

Many people know that using a cell phone while driving is dangerous, but they don't know how dangerous, Froetscher added. "And it's legal. It's legal to do something on the road that endangers your life and endangers the life of other folks around you," she said.

Froetscher is sending letters to all governors and state legislative leaders, urging them to adopt statewide bans. Achieving and enforcing bans in all states is a challenge, but the NSC has successfully overcome challenges in the past, such as seat belt enforcement, child safety seats and teenage driving laws, she said.

"We have found ways to enforce those laws, and this is no different," Froetscher concluded.

According to the Governors Highway Safety Association Web site, only five states -- California, Connecticut, New Jersey, New York, Washington -- plus the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands have laws that prohibit driving while talking on hand-held cell phones.

But even those states that require hands-free devices for cell phones while driving or ban texting while driving don't enforce their laws consistently, Froetscher noted.

According to Froetscher, the data clearly shows that cell phones and other devices cause many accidents because drivers pay more attention to their conversation or text message than where they are on the road.

She cited a study from the Harvard Center of Risk Analysis that found cell phone use while driving accounts for about 6 percent of crashes each year nationwide. That's 636,000 crashes, 330,000 injuries, 12,000 serious injuries and 2,600 deaths, she said.

Another Harvard study put the cost of cell phone-related crashes at about \$43 billion a year.

A 1997 study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* and a report by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety in 2005 found drivers who use cell phones while driving were four times more likely to be in a crash.

Hands-free devices may also cause a hazard, Froetscher added. A study by researchers at the University of Utah found no difference in driver concentration between using hand-held or hands-free devices. In fact, talking to a passenger while driving is much safer than talking on a cell phone, the Utah researchers noted.

In addition, a Virginia Tech study found that 80 percent of crashes result from driver inattention.

More than 100 million people use cell phones while driving, the University of Utah researchers estimated. A poll conducted by the Nationwide Insurance Company found that that 81 percent of those surveyed admitted to talking on a cell phone while driving.

"It will take legislation, enforcement, and lots of education to eventually change this," said Dr. Gavin Melmed, an internist at Baylor University Medical Center in Waco, Tex., who has researched and written extensively on the dangers of cell phone use while driving.

"Once we have added the use of a cell phone while driving to the list of other unacceptable behaviors, such as driving drunk, driving without a seatbelt and having kids on our laps, we will look back and wonder how we could have been so reckless," he said.

"I think people have a vague sense they are doing something risky when they use a cell phone while driving," Melmed added, "but they do it anyway because of the perceived convenience and the lack of accountability."

Dr. David L. Katz, director of the Prevention Research Center at Yale University, agreed that bans on using cell phones while driving were needed, but for him --as with most people -- it will be tough to change a habit that has become so ingrained.

"As a public health practitioner, I routinely invoke the notion that epidemiology should trump ideology when it comes to public health policy," Katz said. "But I confess a ban on all use of cell phones while driving is a tough one for me. I can't imagine that long drive to give a talk without several calls scheduled along the way on my hands-free system."

But the evidence seems rather strong that such a ban would help reduce crashes, and injuries, Katz added.

"Having been distracted from the road myself by calls or e-mail messages on more than one occasion, I find the concept compelling," he said.

### More information

For more information on safe driving, visit the [National Safety Council](#).

SOURCES: Janet Froetscher, president and chief executive officer, National Safety Council, Itasca, Ill.; David L. Katz, M.D., M.P.H., director, Prevention Research Center, Yale University School of Medicine, New Haven, Conn.; Gavin Melmed, M.D., Baylor University Medical Center, Waco, Texas  
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