

Eyes on the road: driver distractions to avoid

Life has a habit of being distracting. Which is less than ideal when you're driving a vehicle. The recently-updated Highway Code reflects this in its list of things to avoid doing whilst on the road.

General distractions

Rule 148 of the Highway Code (previously rule 126) states:

Safe driving and riding needs concentration.

Avoid distractions when driving or riding such as:

- * loud music (this may mask other sounds)
- * trying to read maps
- * inserting a cassette or CD or tuning a radio
- * arguing with your passengers or other road users
- * eating and drinking
- * smoking

The only addition to the previous list is that of smoking. Lighting up whilst driving was banned in Scotland in 2006, and it may only be a matter of time before England and Wales follow suit.

Falling foul of any of the above will not constitute a criminal offence. For obvious reasons, you couldn't criminalise arguing with passengers or tuning a radio, for example. However, if you have an accident or drive badly while engaged in one of these activities, it's likely that you would be committing the offence of careless driving, or not being in a position to control the vehicle.

These activities may also be evidence of dangerous driving - especially if an accident occurs which leads to a death. This is an offence which may lead to a prison sentence. So, although none of the activities are, strictly speaking, illegal, they are likely to exacerbate the situation if an incident occurs. So you couldn't get arrested for smoking behind the wheel, but it could be used against you if something bad happened.

In-vehicle technology

Highway Code rule 150 also identifies in-vehicle multimedia devices as potential distractions. This could include display units such as sat nav or congestion warning devices. Again, it's not an offence to use them, but it is stressed in no uncertain terms that you must retain full control of the vehicle whilst using them. If your sat nav tries to direct your car up some stairs, for example (as happened with a member of Confused.com staff), it's best to revert to your own judgement.

Phones

As you no doubt already know, it is an offence to use a mobile phone handset whilst driving. The only exception is if you dial emergency services on 999 or 112, and you should only do that if it's not practically possible to stop and pull over.

Picture of a driver texting at the wheel

But using a hands-free kit doesn't necessarily get you entirely off the hook, so to speak, as it can still draw your attention from the road. The use of hands-free equipment could also potentially lead to a charge of careless or dangerous driving if you use it while driving badly or if you cause an accident.

Rule 149 of the Highway Code recommends avoiding phone communication altogether, in fact. It states: "It is far safer not to use any telephone while you are driving or riding - find a safe place to stop first or use the voicemail facility and listen to messages later."

The distractions of others

Always remember whilst driving that, though you can do your best to limit distractions and concentrate yourself, you have no control over the attention of others. Any other road user can take their eye off the ball, including pedestrians. Your full attention cannot stop someone who's plugged into their MP3 player from not hearing your car and wandering out in front of it; but it can significantly alter your response to it, so it's best to always be vigilant. And always make sure you're fully insured, just in case.

About the Author

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