

# The Driver: Understanding Driver Distractions

In 2020, almost **3,000** fatal and **205,000** nonfatal distraction-related motor vehicle accidents occurred in the United States<sup>1</sup> and in some parts of Canada, surpassing those caused by impaired driving.<sup>2</sup>

While hand-held phone use has decreased steadily since the early 2000s, the frequency of manipulating hand-held devices has increased due to scrolling social media, internet use, smart phone apps and more.

## As a commercial motor vehicle driver, you are<sup>3</sup>:

- 6x more likely to be involved in an at-fault accident when participating in hand-held browser activities
- Nearly 6x more likely to be involved in an at-fault accident when reaching for an object
- Over 4x more likely to be involved in an at-fault accident when you take your eyes off the road for longer than two seconds

### Visual

Visual distractions, inside and outside your vehicle, can be distracting.

Examples include billboards and signs, other vehicles, pedestrians, passengers, cell phones and infotainment systems.

### Auditory

Auditory distractions may cause you to search for or look at the source of noise instead of the road.

Examples include music, passengers, sirens and honking.

Driver distractions may encompass one or more elements.

### Manual

Something you may reach for, grab or touch, causing you to take your hands off the steering wheel.

Examples include reaching for a phone, picking up food or papers, and manipulating a GPS system or computer.

### Cognitive

Something you are thinking about may cause you to lose focus on driving.

Examples include mental distractions, work-related or personal stress, music and talking.

<sup>1</sup> <https://injuryfacts.nsc.org/motor-vehicle/motor-vehicle-safety-issues/distracted-driving/>

<sup>2</sup> Traffic Injury Research Foundation, 2019: <https://tirf.ca/road-safety/distracted-driving/>

<sup>3</sup> According to recently published data from Virginia Tech Transportation Institute, studies show that particular distracting tasks have an increased likelihood for at-fault accidents to occur. To learn more, please reference: [Analysis of Naturalistic Driving Data to Assess Distraction and Drowsiness in Drivers of Commercial Motor Vehicles](#) (published August 2021)



# The Driver: Situational Awareness While Driving

Situational awareness is recognizing where you are, where you are supposed to be, and whether anyone or anything around you is a threat to your safety. Situational awareness while driving is integral to ensuring that your actions and reactions can be completed in sufficient time to prevent an accident.

Consider these tips to improve your situational awareness while driving:

1

**Keep your eyes moving.** Scan back and forth across your field of vision and scan your mirrors. Actively scan traffic and environmental conditions. When you allow your eyes to remain fixed on any one thing, your peripheral vision begins to narrow into tunnel vision, resulting in a decrease in your ability to detect movement to the sides.

2

**Identify risk areas.** If you are approaching a busy intersection, study the vehicles turning and approaching from other streets. Search for moving and stationary objects as well as pedestrians who may be in or near the road. Watch pedestrian body language, as it may signal an intended action (such as crossing the road).

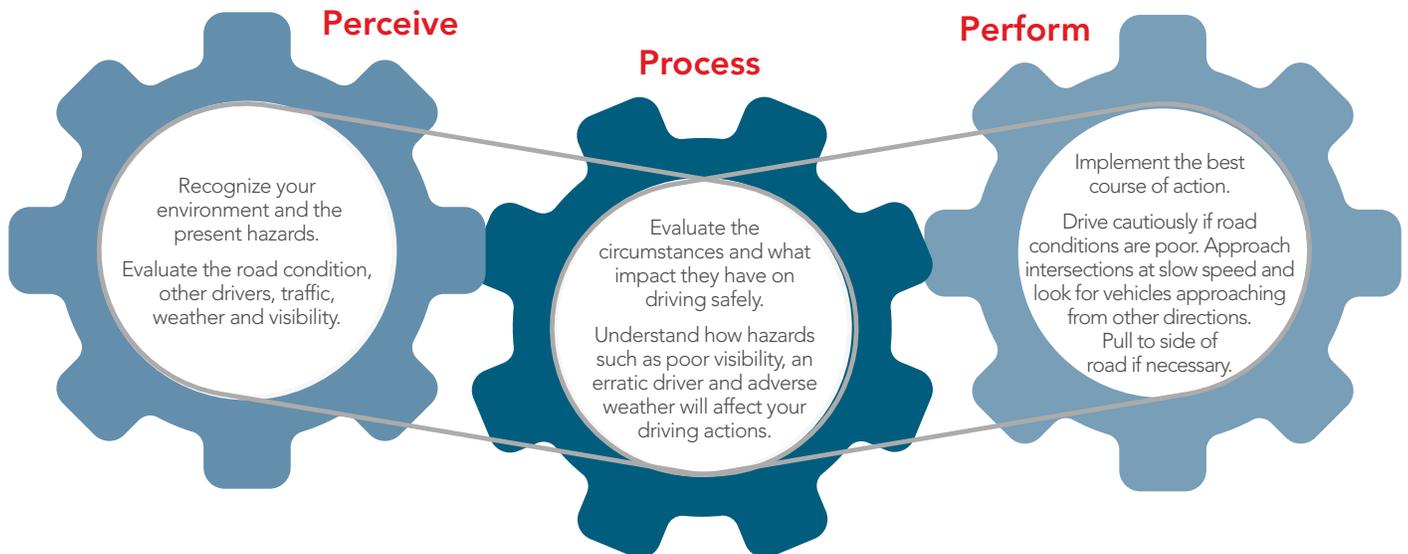
3

**Watch for subtle changes in other vehicles.** A drift in the lane or slight angling of the front wheels can indicate an impending lane change or that the driver is distracted. Observe the distance between the driver's tires and line markings on the road. If it starts to become smaller, prepare yourself for an unexpected lane change.

4

**Focus your thoughts.** Mental and cognitive distractions prevent the full attention of your surroundings and environment. Limit mental distractions and focus on the present.

Remember the 3Ps to help ensure situational awareness.



4 [Aeronautical Decision-Making: Federal Aviation Administration](#)

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# The Driver: Tips to Reduce Auto Accidents

In 2020, the United States and Canada had fewer vehicles on the road, but the decrease in miles driven did not correlate to fewer accidents. The National Safety Council (NSC) reports that even with an 11% decrease in miles driven, vehicle accident-related **deaths in the U.S. rose 8.3%**, which is attributed in part to an increase in risky

driving behaviors such as non-restrained occupants (14%), speeding (17%) and alcohol-impaired crashes (14%)<sup>5</sup>.

While the reason behind this increase is still unknown, it remains the responsibility of every driver to ensure their own safety and the safety of others.

## Follow the Law



**Maintain appropriate speeds and follow lane markings and traffic signs and signals.**

Do not bypass built-in vehicle safety systems such as seat-belt signals and brake alarms.

Do not get behind the wheel if you are under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Over-the-counter medications can also impact driving behaviors. Talk to your employer if you begin to use prescription medications or other substances that may impair your driving behavior.

## 30 Seconds to Prep



**Take 30 seconds to run through a list of possible distractions before you leave.**

Set the radio to your favorite station and adjust the volume so you can hear outside noises such as sirens.

Make last-minute phone calls or texts messages, then set your phone on Do Not Disturb and place in an area where you will not be tempted to reach for it, such as the trunk or glove box.

Many newer vehicles have built-in safety features. Take a few seconds to verify that these systems are turned on.

## Leverage Vehicle Systems



**Often, infotainment and telematics systems have monitors in place to alert others or emergency responders in the event of an incident.**

Work with your employer or the monitor of the telematics system equipped in the vehicle to improve your driver behaviors. You may not recognize late braking, but these systems will.

## Store Your Smart Phone



**Cell phone use while driving is prohibited in many states and Canadian provinces.**

Regardless of your state or local laws, put your phone down, even when stopped at lights.

Use the Do Not Disturb function on your smart phone and opt for automatic responses while you drive.

## Designate Responsibilities



**Designate responsibilities when passengers are in the car.**

Consider assigning the front passenger the duty of monitoring for navigation changes and environmental hazards.

Make sure all passengers are properly buckled in and understand that your role is to safely get everyone to the destination, not change the radio station, moderate conversations, make phone calls or adjust vehicle settings.

<sup>5</sup> <https://injuryfacts.nsc.org/motor-vehicle/overview/impact-of-recessions/>



# The Driver: Driving Under the Influence

Regardless of the substance, driving while impaired can cause significant cognitive and functional challenges<sup>6,7</sup>. This resource provides a brief oversight of how substances can impair the body, what to do if you are under the influence, and public resources for assistance with substance abuse.



If you find yourself in a situation where assistance is needed:

1

**Understand your employer's substance abuse program and policies.** Many employers have a zero tolerance policy for safety sensitive or critical positions, including driving operations. Consider the risk you take when driving under the influence as well as employment and legal ramifications.

2

**Get help.** Some employers offer assistance programs for employees and family members who struggle with addiction. Whether you reach out to your employer or seek outside assistance, take action to address the addiction. Request an alternative job role if your use or addiction interferes with your driving tasks.

3

**Do not get behind the wheel.** Notify your employer that you cannot drive due to medication or substance impairment. When properly prescribed, an employer must accommodate employees per requirements outlined by the American Disabilities Act (ADA)<sup>8</sup> and Accessibility Standards across Canada.

**Resources for Assistance:**  
[SAMSHA 1-800-662-HELP \(4357\)](https://www.samhsa.gov)  
[HELP.org](https://www.help.org)  
[Help for Veterans](https://www.veteransaffairs.gov)  
[Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction](https://www.ccsa.ca)

<sup>6</sup> Illicit & Controlled Substances and OTC Medication: <https://www.nhtsa.gov/risky-driving/drug-impaired-driving#:~:text=Many%20Substances%20Can%20Impair%20Driving,-Related%20Resources%20NHTSA&text=Alcohol%2C%20marijuana%2C%20and%20other%20drugs,drivers%20more%20aggressive%20and%20reckless.>  
<sup>7</sup> Marijuana and Alcohol (and others): <https://nida.nih.gov/publications/drugfacts/drugged-driving>  
<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ijkel.com/learn/news/092016/What-you-can-and-cant-do-about-prescription-drug-use-at-work>