

# There's a reason we can't text and drive: science

By Robert Petrucosta

Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt is the fastest human being on Earth. Olympic gold medals. World records in the 100- and 200-meter dashes. In fact, his speedy accomplishments may well have inspired a commercial last year featuring a sprinter darting past the competition, texting the whole time. In the end, he wins the race without once setting foot outside his lane.

If only it were that easy — and safe — to text while driving.

As a country, we seem to be getting this message: Individual states have been steadily enacting laws to ban the use of cellphones and to restrict texting while driving. In fact, we're halfway there. According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, text messaging has been banned for all drivers in 28 states and the District of Columbia. Safety advocates are coming out of their seats to reiterate what many studies have revealed — that the combination of texting and driving is profoundly dangerous.

But in order to get the rest of the country to come along — and to save countless lives in the process — we'll need to do more than just tell people “no.” People should understand that this isn't a matter of a nanny state gone mad. It's a matter of science.

## Focus, people

There are three basic types of distractions: visual, manual and cognitive. While all driving distractions carry some risk, texting is the most dangerous because it involves all three types. As the National Safety Council has argued, the human brain cannot multitask. Sure the human brain can juggle tasks very rapidly, but it can only perform one task at a time. A person who is texting while driving is overloading his brain, requiring divided attention.

Just a year ago, a study conducted by the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute using long-haul truck drivers concluded that

when motorists texted while driving, their collision risk was 23 times greater.

The researchers also found that actively texting drivers take their eyes off the road for an average of 4.6 seconds out of every 6 seconds. At 55 mph, these drivers will travel the length of a football field, including the end zones, without looking at the road. With more than 280 million cellphone subscribers — and climbing — in the USA, the risk is growing exponentially.

## Only birds can fly

A bird in flight might be able to get away with not paying attention during a cross-country trip. After all, millions of years of evolution have given birds the sharp

visual acuity to recognize and react to objects at high speed. But man was not meant to fly. Physiologically, man was designed to travel on two legs.

Even Bolt, when setting the world speed record, was clocked at a mere 27 mph — hardly the requisite speed for flight.

Clearly, few of us can run anywhere nearly as fast as Bolt. In fact, the average top running speed for most of us is about 15 mph. When we get behind the wheel of a car, we experience some of the same sensations of flying, such as speed and centrifugal force. But as we begin to move at speeds greater than what we are designed to handle, we have difficulty reacting.

The faster motorists drive above this 15 mph threshold, the harder it is to escape the physiological limitations that separate us — and, yes, even Bolt — from our high-flying friends. Throw in texting while driving at such speeds, and you have a deadly mix for the driver and those unfortunate enough to share the road with him.

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