

Troopers to increase enforcement during distracted driving month

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Read a good book, newspaper article, or sent a funny text lately? Great, but just be sure not to do that while driving. Joining police departments across the country, Maryland state troopers are increasing enforcement initiatives focused on distracted driving this month in an effort to remind drivers to focus on driving and traffic safety whenever they are behind the wheel.

Beginning today, troopers will conduct additional patrols with the goal of identifying drivers who are involved in activities that are prohibited by law, or significantly divert their attention from safe driving. These include, but are not limited to, texting, handheld cell phone use, grooming, reading, watching a video, using a navigation system, or even adjusting a radio or other entertainment device. Commanders at each of the 22 barracks of the Maryland State Police have been directed to conduct special distracted driving enforcement operations during April.

Texting is still what experts call the 'most alarming distraction' because it involves 'visual, manual, and cognitive attention from the driver' (www.distraction.gov). It has been estimated that a person texting takes his or her eyes off the road for an average of five seconds when texting. This is like covering the length of a football field while driving blindfolded, if you are driving at 55 mph.

Drivers are often unaware that diverting attention from the road can unconsciously lead to unsafe driving behavior, such as failure to drive in a single lane, following too close, or failing to reduce speed to avoid a traffic crash. Drivers should eliminate any activity while driving that diverts their eyes from the road ahead, their hands from the steering wheel, or their thoughts from being aware of the traffic conditions ahead and around them.

The Maryland Highway Safety Office determined more than 31,100 people are injured each year in crashes in our state because of distracted driving. Maryland law, also known as Jake's Law, states a driver causing serious injury or death while talking on a handheld cellphone or texting may receive up to three years in prison and a \$5,000 fine. These are primary offenses and police officers can stop drivers when those activities are observed, regardless of the presence of other violations.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has determined drivers under age 20 are in the age group with the largest proportion of drivers who are distracted. NHTSA also reports drivers in their 20s comprise 27 percent of the distracted drivers in fatal crashes nationwide.

The increased enforcement is part of an effort promoted across the country by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and locally, by the Maryland Highway Safety Office. Funding for Maryland State Police distracted driving patrols is being provided by the Maryland Highway Safety Office.

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