

Editors Note: This arrived in my email in-box recently and but I couldn't identify the sender. Having just visited the UK and discovered that people are getting fined for using their phones on the move, I felt it was worth passing it on - Thanks to the anon sender.

Car Clinic: Sobering research on phones and driving

Why is there a bill before parliament seeking to ban the use of mobile phones when driving?

It has long been accepted that using a telephone while driving is a distraction and research has suggested that it can increase your chance of having an accident by a factor of four. Janet Anderson, the Labour MP for Rossendale and Darwen, tabled a private member's bill in November that called for a ban on the use of hand-held telephones while driving. It is soon to receive its second reading.

But exactly how dangerous is it to drive while on the telephone?

According to a report published recently by Direct Line, Britain's largest car insurer, it is more dangerous than driving while drunk.

Surely not?

It depends on your definition of drunk. Direct Line's tests used subjects with the legal maximum blood alcohol level in the UK (80mg alcohol per 100ml blood). The tests were carried out by the Transport Research Laboratory (TRL) on 20 mobile phone users aged 21-45 who had to carry out a series of tasks on a simulator.

They revealed, unsurprisingly, that sober subjects who were not on the phone drove best, but also that sober drivers using a mobile phone performed worse than drivers with the maximum allowable amount of alcohol in their blood.

The drivers on the phone had reaction times that were 30% worse than those who had had a drink and nearly 50% worse than sober drivers.

At 70mph, a normal driver travelled an average of 31 metres before reacting compared with 35m for someone at the alcohol limit and 45m for someone using a hand-held mobile.

What about hands-free sets?

According to the research, a hands-free set gives a reaction distance of 39m at 70mph, which is still worse than that for drunk drivers.

A MORI survey of 2,000 drivers, however, saw almost 80% agree that using a hand-held mobile was "very distracting", but less than 30% said the same about hands-free sets. It also suggested that the most

distracting thing people do behind the wheel is send text messages, followed closely by reading a map.

In the survey 31% of drivers admitted to using hand-held telephones behind the wheel, which approximates to 10 million drivers in the UK.

Has the Direct Line report been well received?

No. David Jamieson, the parliamentary under-secretary of state for transport, said it was "very unfortunate" that it compared mobile phone use and drink-driving.

Edmund King, head of the RAC Foundation for Motoring, went further. "Making a comparison between drink-driving and the use of mobile telephones is dangerous nonsense," he said. "For a start, the study used people who were not drunk, but legal to drive. The real issue is enforcement.

"Of course it is dangerous to use a hand-held mobile telephone while driving and laws exist to prosecute people for doing exactly that. What we need is more enforcement, yet since the introduction of speed cameras there are fewer police out there. "What we don't need is another law that won't make any difference."

Did anyone approve?

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) supports a specific ban on the use of mobile phones while driving and welcomed the recent outlawing of the use of hand-held phones while driving in Ireland.

The society's head of road safety, Kevin Clinton, said: "Many countries in Europe and around the world have introduced a ban in the interests of road safety and we hope the UK follows Ireland's example very soon."

What action can now be taken against people who talk on the phone while driving?

You can be prosecuted for careless driving, for which there is a maximum fine of £2,500 and usually between three to nine points on your licence. If the offender is found guilty of dangerous driving, he or she can go to prison for up to two years and face an unlimited fine.

Eds note: The UK law says...You must have proper control of your vehicle at all times. If the use of a phone causes you to drive in a careless or dangerous manner you could be prosecuted for those offences. The penalties include an unlimited fine, disqualification and up to two years imprisonment.

In the UK, my research shows that a hands free car kit could cost as little as £15 for something with a built in speaker that you plug into the cigar lighter up to £500 for a fully fitted dealer version. My own, which operates through the car speakers on a professionally fitted mount cost £250 - somewhat cheaper than a fine!

