



Hands-Free Georgia Act: A Law That Saves Lives

Every day, at least nine Americans die and 100 are injured in distracted driving crashes. This is an epidemic, and one which can be prevented.

Last year, the Medical Association of Atlanta joined with a coalition of advocates to fight this epidemic. The coalition included physicians across the state, as well as loved ones of those injured or killed in distracted driving accidents. After gathering support, and educating members of the Georgia General Assembly, the Hands-Free Georgia Act, was passed into law and went into effect last June.

Early studies of the law showed a significant impact, with a study by TrueMotion showing a 21% decrease in distracted driving immediately after passage. Unfortunately, a more recent study suggests that there is still work to be done. Many people in Georgia are still putting their lives at risk all for the sake of using their cellphones.

According to the 2019 AAA Consumer Pulse Survey, 77% of Georgians are aware of the law that prohibits motorists from using handheld cellphones while driving. More than 80% think it is dangerous for someone driving to text or email.

However, more than 60% say they still see motorists texting or emailing behind the wheel.

The physicians of the Medical Association of Atlanta want to do more. Part of the practice of medicine is to educate patients about healthy lifestyle choices that will help them avoid negative outcomes and will also improve the health of the community. We have cared for patients and families whose lives have been dramatically altered by accidents caused by people using their digital devices instead of paying attention to the road.

Just as we were on the forefront of pushing for seat belt legislation to increase driving safety in the past, we now are committed to continuing efforts to combat distracted driving. We are working with the Medical Association of Georgia to make this work a priority nationwide, by pushing for national initiatives from both the American Medical Association and the Centers for Disease Control.

We need the attention of health care leaders, and we need the help of every driver on the road to combat this epidemic. April was National Distracted Driving Awareness Month and it is important to remember some key facts.

The Hands-Free Georgia Act prohibits motorists from holding cellphones or other wireless devices or supporting them with any part of their body. The law allows all drivers – teenagers and adults alike – to use those devices while driving if you use hands-free technology.

The next time you get behind the wheel, please remember:

+ Drivers who text are up to eight times as likely to be involved in a crash.

- + Sending or reading a text message takes your eyes off the road for about 5 seconds, long enough to cover a football field while driving at 55 mph, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.
- + Even Drivers just talking on a cellphone are up to four times more likely to be involved in a crash.

A quick glance at a phone while you are behind the wheel could change a life forever.

During this year's National Distracted Driving Awareness Month – and every time you are behind the wheel -- why not take care of yourself and put your phone away while you are behind the wheel. After all, it's the law.

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Established in 1854, the Medical Association of Atlanta promotes the health and safety of our community through physician leadership.

Dr. Martha Wilber, 2018-2019 president of the Medical Association of Atlanta, is a physician with Kaiser Permanente.