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BE WELL

# A new cellphone distraction

September 27, 2010

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As Massachusetts' ban on texting while driving starts this week, researchers are reporting on another way that cellphones can distract motorists: overheard conversations.

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Lauren Emberson and her Cornell University colleagues studied what happens when people hear one side of a cellphone conversation — a “halfalogue,” in contrast to a dialogue or a monologue. According to their hypothesis, halfalogues are more cognitively taxing because

they're more unpredictable. Dialogues and monologues have a pattern we can anticipate, but halfalogues leave us guessing and distracted.

To test this idea, the researchers asked 24 volunteers to perform two tasks that demanded either visual or verbal attention. In one task, participants tracked dots on a screen using a circular computer cursor, keeping the dot in the center of the circle. In the other task, they had to remember and spot four target letters on a computer screen and ignore other letters streaming by. Both tasks approximated the amount of attention one would need while driving, to stay in the proper lane or react to traffic signals.

While performing these tasks, the participants heard silence first, and then three other recordings: one side of a cellphone conversation, both sides of a cellphone conversation, and a monologue from one of the callers summarizing what was said.

Compared with when they heard silence, the participants performed significantly worse on both tasks when they heard the halfalogues, but almost the same when they heard dialogues or monologues. In a second experiment, when 17 participants heard halfalogues altered so they sounded like someone was speaking underwater, they performed no worse on the tasks, suggesting it is the speech and not the sound that was distracting.

So even if a driver isn't talking or texting on a cellphone, a passenger's cellphone conversation could be distracting, too.

**BOTTOM LINE:** Listening to half a cellphone conversation is more distracting than listening to a whole conversation.

**CAUTIONS:** The study was small and conducted among college students, so the results may not apply to other people.

**WHERE TO FIND IT:** Psychological Science, online Sept. 3

## Swallowing disc batteries can cause damage quickly

As disc batteries that power cameras and other devices are becoming more common, so are cases of children swallowing the tiny batteries. A new study describes the dangers to children, especially if there's a delay in diagnosing the problem.

Dr. Stanley Kimball of Mount Carmel Health System in Columbus, Ohio, led a team that reviewed the medical charts of 10 children over a 10-year period who had been treated in one hospital after swallowing disc batteries. Their average age was 3 years old. Three of them had only minor damage to the esophagus, but the other seven suffered more serious injuries when alkaline leaked from the batteries, burning and killing tissue.

In two children, the esophagus was perforated, requiring surgery. In these cases, the batteries were discovered on X-rays four weeks after one child

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