

Look up! From your cellphone, that is

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In this July 10, 2012, photo, pedestrians cross K Street and Connecticut Avenue NW near the Farragut North Metro entrance in downtown Washington, D.C. Photo: AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais

WASHINGTON — People distracted by cellphones are walking in front of cars, into trees and street signs. They are falling off curbs and bridges. They're walking into wet cement.

They have suffered cuts and bruises, and head injuries — some have even been killed.

Many cities and states are promoting walkable neighborhoods, in part to attract more young people. At the same time, some are also giving tickets to distracted walkers and lowering speed limits to make streets safer for pedestrians.

Pedestrian injuries caused by cellphone use are up 35 percent since 2010, according to federal emergency room data reviewed by Stateline.

Danger Zones

Every year, thousands of pedestrians are injured as they walk in cities and some researchers blame at least 10 percent of those injuries on distraction by a mobile device, such as a phone or portable music player.

To reduce the number of injuries and deaths associated with distracted walking, Utah and New Jersey have experimented with fines for texting in dangerous walking situations. New York state has lowered speed limits in New York City, in part to make traffic less dangerous for distracted walkers.

“We have to design streets for the way people actually behave, and behavior is changing,” said Noah Budnick of NYC-based Transportation Alternatives. “If you’re looking at a phone when you’re walking around, that shouldn’t mean death. So we have to design forgiving streets.”

Slowing The Cars

New York City has new speed limits — 20 miles per hour (mph) in Central Park and 25 mph in the rest of the city unless otherwise posted. The city has also been blocking off more streets to make safer pedestrian plazas.

U.S. Secretary of Transportation Anthony Foxx has given \$1.6 million in grants to Louisville, New York City and Philadelphia for walker-safety programs.

“We’ve got to encourage people to have an awareness that this problem is a real problem,” Foxx said last year.

In 2012, 78,000 pedestrians were injured — the highest number since 2001 — according to the National Highway Traffic Administration.

Also in 2012, 4,700 walkers were killed, a number that has been increasing since 2009, after falling for several years before that.

Stay In Your E-Lane!

Some areas are focusing on stopping people who are not paying attention while walking. In Utah, distracted walkers can face a \$50 fine. In New Jersey, police used jaywalking laws to crack down on people using phones while walking into traffic.

Philadelphia had a different strategy: They made a joke of it. On April Fools’ Day 2012 the city painted “e-lanes” on sidewalks, reserved for people staring at their phones.

“We know that many, many people are using the sidewalks, looking at their iPhones, BlackBerrys, other electronic devices and they’re quite distracted by those devices, bumping into people,” Mayor Michael Nutter said in a video, as a distracted walker bumped into him.

But many pedestrians interviewed by the city seemed to like the idea and take it seriously.

“As a (cellphone) user, it’ll keep most of those bozos out of my way,” one onlooker said.

"I'm a severe texter and walker, so I don't know if I can quit on my own," another said.

Minnesota, Utah, North Carolina, South Carolina and Washington state have also started pedestrian safety programs to reduce traffic deaths.

San Francisco is pledging \$50 million for its Walk First program and will scrutinize "high injury corridors" to determine why they are so dangerous.

The plan also proposes improvements such as raised crosswalks and traffic islands for pedestrians.

Distracted Drivers And Walkers Collide

Distracted driving is also causing more pedestrian deaths, researchers say, because a driver and a walker each staring at their cellphone can be a dangerous combination.

Half of pedestrians admit to talking on the phone while walking across the street. One out of 4 say they text or email while crossing the street, even though most realize it's dangerous, according to a survey last year by Liberty Mutual Insurance.

"So much attention has been paid, and rightly so, to distracted driving, that we have ignored the fact that distracted walking and crossing can be just as risky," said David Melton, a driving safety expert with Liberty Mutual.

While working as an emergency room doctor, University of Buffalo researcher Dr. Dietrich Jehle studied pedestrian injuries. He estimates that 1 in 10 pedestrian injuries is now related to distracted walking, and that it causes more accidents than distracted driving.

Texting is the most dangerous thing to do while walking, even more dangerous than listening to music or talking on the phone, he found.

A 2011 study found that texting while walking seriously impeded navigation. In simulations, walkers had a 61 percent error rate while distracted.

"While talking on the phone is a distraction, texting is much more dangerous because you can't see the path in front of you," Jehle said.