



Report #17 - 10 Most Dangerous Foods to Eat on the Road

Get your hands out of the bucket 'o wings and back on the wheel. Eating while driving is dangerous -- and it drives up the cost of insurance for everyone.

Eating while you drive is one of the most distracting things you can do, according to several recent surveys by insurance companies and data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA).

Hagerty Classic Insurance, a provider of classic-car insurance, began to look more closely at the issue after a DMV check on an insurance applicant turned up a "restraining order" against anything edible within his reach while driving. The man apparently had several previous accidents related to food on his driving record.

Insurance can be a messy business. Hagerty President McKeel Hagerty says his company often receives claims for damage to the interior of classic cars caused by food. "It's tough to replace original wool carpets or particular colors of leather seats," he says.

Though NHTSA doesn't track specific information on food-related distraction, it does track general distractions. As of 2000, distractions in cars were considered the cause in 25% of police-reported motor vehicle crashes. According to NHTSA, "distraction was most likely to be involved in rear-end collisions in which the lead vehicle was stopped and in single-vehicle crashes." What makes distraction such a problem is the confluence of the distraction, such as eating, and the unexpected occurrence of events on the road, such as a sharp curve or a driver stopped ahead of you.

The a.m. commute is a mess

In looking at the insurer's history of claims, Hagerty found that most drivers had problems in the morning on the way to work, when spills were likely to mar their work attire. That made drivers more anxious to clean up spills while still trying to drive and didn't necessarily make them more likely to pull off the road to deal with the mess.

"It really seems it's more the spill than the eating," says Hagerty. "Anything that drips is probably not a good idea." Hagerty and his staff decided to do a study of their own to see which foods are the worst offenders, and although Hagerty says he ruined a few shirts in the process, they found



some interesting information.

Coffee is the top offender because of its tendency to spill. Even in cups with travel lids, somehow the liquid finds its way out of the opening each time you hit a bump, says Hagerty. "I've certainly spilled my share of coffee while I'm driving, and it's not when I'm trying to drink, it's when I hit bumps in the road." And if the stain on your clothes isn't bad enough, the high temperature of most coffees can cause serious burns and distract drivers who are trying to drive while in pain.

Do you really need a list?

The top 10 food offenders:

1. Coffee. It always finds a way out of the cup.
2. Hot soup. Many people drink it like coffee. Same effects.
3. Tacos. "A food that can disassemble itself without much help, leaving your car looking like a salad bar," says Hagerty.
4. Chili. Dangerous drips and slops down the front of clothing.
5. Hamburgers. Grease, ketchup, mustard on your hands, your clothes and the steering wheel.
6. Barbecue. Spicy and dicey. There is the temptation to lick your fingers. More grease on the steering wheel.
7. Fried chicken. Ditto. Grease coats everything you touch.
8. Jelly or cream-filled doughnuts. Dangers relate to oozing while cruising. Raspberry jelly stains difficult to remove.
9. Soft drinks. Prone to spills and sudden fizzing if car makes sudden movements. Cola fizz in the nose is perilous while driving.
10. Chocolate. Tempting but treacherous. Try to clean it off the steering wheel and you're likely to end up swerving.

Insurance companies such as State Farm Insurance and Allstate Insurance don't track specific information on eating and driving because it's too difficult to break it down. State Farm says the company is aware it is a problem. The difficulty in pinning down the exact cause of accidents lies in separating distractions such as cell phone use, talking to passengers, reading the newspaper, and eating. All are dangerous to engage in while trying to operate a two-ton piece of machinery.



Look, Ma, no hands!

Hagerty found that driving a standard vehicle with a stick shift while eating can double the potential for an accident, since one hand is holding food and the other hand is shifting. That leaves no hands for steering, says Hagerty. Even more dangerous is using a cell phone, eating and driving. "When the phone rings, the driving distraction increases significantly and, in a rush to answer, drivers forget they're driving," says Hagerty.

How widespread is the food problem? According to a survey conducted by the Response Insurance Agency in 2000, eating while driving ranks as the No. 2 driving distraction. Fifty-seven percent of drivers surveyed say they eat and drive. The No. 1 distraction, noted by 62% of surveyed drivers, is tuning the radio, and No. 3, noted by 56% of drivers, is turning around to talk with passengers. Interestingly, only 29% of drivers surveyed listed talking on a cell phone as a distracting activity in which they engage.

In a 2001 survey of 1,000 drivers for Exxon, more than 70% of drivers say they eat while driving, up from 58% in 1995. Some 83% say they drink coffee, juice, or soda while driving and a few even say they'd love a microwave in their car.