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DISTRACTED DRIVING STUDY

Behavioral Traits Lead to Phone Use while Driving

A NEW STUDY has identified certain personality traits that can lead to distracted driving and other risky behavior behind the wheel.

The study by researchers at the University of Alabama at Birmingham found that extraverted older adults and conscientious, curious teens may be more likely than others to take risks while driving.

In particular, the researchers focused on the use of mobile phones: talking, texting or otherwise interacting with the device (like checking Facebook, surfing the Internet, using an app or searching for music).

Before studying the issue, the researchers used one of the most accepted models of personality that puts people into a continuum of each of the following commong personality traints:

1. Those who are open to new experiences.
2. Those who are conscientious.
3. Those who are extraverted.
4. Those who are agreeable.
5. Those who are neurotic.

THE FINDINGS

Teens

- Drivers who were more open to new experiences were more likely to engage in texting and interacting with their mobile phone. A 10% increase in openness to new experiences was associated with a 22% increase in risk for distracted driving. This jibes with earlier research that found that thrill-seekers and impulsive individuals – traits associated with openness – are cited more often for driving violations than the average driver.
- Conscientious drivers were more likely to text and engage with their phone. Researchers were surprised to find that a 10% increase in conscientiousness correlated with a 21% increase in risk for distracted driving behaviors.
- The less agreeable a teen was, the more likely they were to use their phone while driving. The study found that a 10% decrease in agreeableness correlated with a 16% increase for distracted driving.
- Cooperative, agreeable teens were less likely to engage in distracted driving behaviors because they were more safety-minded and had respect for the law.

Older Adults

- Researchers found only one personality factor that made older adults more likely to engage in talking or interacting with their mobile phones: those who were extraverted. A 10% increase in extraversion was associated with a 20% increase in instances of distracted driving from phone use.
- Researchers saw no link between personality traits and texting.

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RISK-PREMIUM TRADE-OFF

When to Reduce Your Car Insurance Coverage

EVERY STATE has minimum insurance requirements for car owners, specifically bodily injury and property damage liability. Whatever the minimums are, your insurance has to cover them no matter what, but as your car ages, you may consider scaling back on your coverage to save money.

But when is the right time? Preferably when the math works out in your favor, so that you trade off the money you save on your premium for more risk but at a lower cost than when your car was new.

That's not easy to figure out though, as you have to take into consideration many variables.

The following is a rough guide on car insurance coverage that you can use to determine what is appropriate for you and your vehicle.

Fresh off the lot

If you are financing your car, the lender will require that you carry collision and comprehensive coverage. But even if you paid cash for that new car, it behoves you to carry the same coverage.

Comprehensive insurance covers anything that might happen to your car, like hail damage, if someone hits your vehicle in a parking lot and runs, or if it is vandalized.

In this case, the insurance covers the value of the damage (minus your deductible).

Collision is almost the same as comprehensive, except that it covers any damage to your vehicle that's your fault, like backing into a tree.

If you really want to be covered all the way for that new car, you can also buy gap insurance.

A gap policy will make up the difference between what your insurance policy may deem the value of your car to be if it is totaled, and what you still owe the lender.

Close to paying off your loan (car 2-5 years old)

If you are close to paying off your loan, you may want to consider dropping gap coverage as most certainly the car is worth more than what you owe.

Once you pay off the loan, if it's still between two and five years old you should keep comprehensive and collision coverage, as you would still be out of pocket considerably if it is totaled due to your own negligence or stolen and not recovered.

Six to 11 years old

At this point, you may want to consider getting rid of your comprehensive coverage. But before you do that, you should determine what your car is worth in the resale market, using the *Kelley Blue Book* or *Edmunds.com*.

Kelley Blue Book dictates what your insurer would pay you if the car is totaled. Would you be okay losing that much if your car is totaled or stolen, or if it suffers significant damage that was your fault?

Compare how much you save every month with that figure and determine for yourself if dropping comprehensive and collision coverage is worth it.

Twelve years and older

If you're still paying full coverage at this point, the value of your vehicle may no longer be worth the burden of the higher premium.

One option is to ditch collision coverage, which tends to be more expensive, but keep comprehensive, which will still cover your vehicle in case of that parking lot hit-and-run or theft.

If you are still unsure, please call us and we can help you determine what coverage is best for you. ❖

PLUMBING PROBLEMS

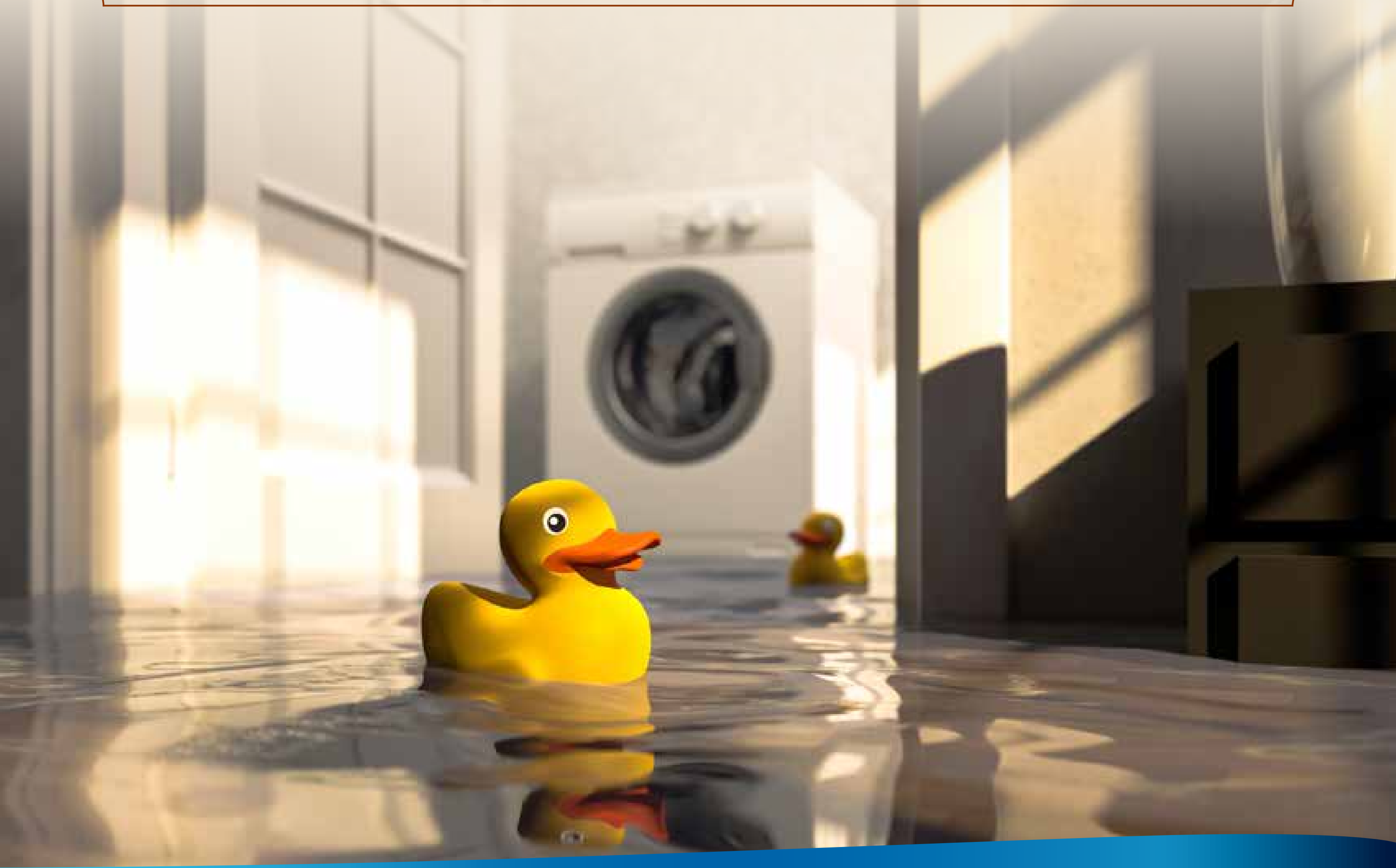
Early Leak Detection Can Minimise Damage, Costs

LEAKS IN your plumbing can range from just the annoying – an old faucet that drips ceaselessly – to leaking pipes that can cause significant damage to the structure of your home and create mold problems.

Repair costs can quickly escalate into the thousands of dollars, so it behoves you to detect leaks early and fix them as quickly as possible. Even leaky faucets, while not causing any damage to the structure of your home, can end up costing you by increasing your water bill (not to mention the wastefulness of letting all that water go down the drain).

Early detection is especially critical for slow leaks under sinks, which insurance companies typically don't cover if the leak is found to be long-standing. You can take these proactive steps to avoid costly damages in heating, ventilation and air-conditioning units, sewer lines, drains and other areas:

- Change out washing machine hoses every five years. Use reinforced steel-braided hoses instead of rubber if you can. Turn off the washing machine water supply if you leave the house unoccupied for an extended period of time.
- Listen for running water in your bathroom. Toilet tanks that never stop refilling can boost a monthly water bill by 50%. Be sure assemblies, flappers and cut-off valves work.
- Inspect cabinets under sinks at least once a year for drips and larger leaks. Leaks also occur under dishwashers and refrigerators.
- Periodically check the plastic hose that connects the fridge ice maker to the water line. Replace the hose if it's discolored or cracked.
- Consider a water detection alarm. These devices alert you to possible leaks in water-prone areas such as bathrooms and basements. More advanced water alarms will even alert you by text message or via your home security system app.
- Check for condensation and corrosion around pipes. Cracked or warped flooring is a telltale sign of a leak.
- Check your water heater every year. Look for corrosion, leaks or a bulging tank.
- The heater's anode rods, which are used to attract corrosive elements in the water and prevent rust, will eventually corrode as well. Hire a professional to check them every three years.
- Clogged drain pans in attic air handlers and leaks in radiators can damage walls, floors and ceilings. Pay for regular professional inspections of HVAC units.
- Keep your rain gutters clear to avoid overflow. Be sure downspouts direct water away from the house to prevent foundation damage or seepage into basements. ❖



Your Tax Refund Has Been Stolen…Now What?

We hope that you've filed your tax return on time this year and that you're going to receive a nice refund check from the IRS.

We also hope that you're not one of the growing number of Americans who are being cheated out of their refund checks by fraudsters who specialize in identity theft.

If you are, you'll know it when you receive a letter from the IRS rejecting your tax forms because they've already been filed. In other words, someone else has filed in your name.

If you've received a notice from the IRS stating that more than one return has been filed in your name, or if you believe your identity has been used fraudulently, *Money* magazine recommends that you:

Report the fraud quickly

You can start by calling the IRS Identity Protection Specialized Unit at 800-908-4490. They will ask you to also fill out an identity theft affidavit, known as Form 14039. Once you've filed that, the IRS can put an alert on your account.

After that you should receive an identity protection personal identification number – essentially a PIN number that you can use along with your Social Security number on future tax returns.

It's also a good idea to file a report with the police, as someone may have simply stolen your check from your mailbox.

If you live in the tax fraud hotbeds of Florida, Georgia and Washington D.C., you can apply for a PIN without having been an ID theft victim, thanks to a new IRS initiative. To get the six-digit number, you need to register and verify your identity online. You can sign up on the IRS website.

Gather evidence

It's a good idea to gather up all of your files if you have to report the theft of your tax refund to the IRS. It's recommended that you have copies of your tax returns dating back for about three years when you contact the IRS, to help get your case moving faster.

You should also file a theft report with the local police or sheriff's office.

You should also have at the ready your driver's license, birth certificate, passport, two recent utility bills and your marriage certificate if you're married. The IRS will likely ask you to make copies of these documents as well as the police report, so the agency can get to work on verifying your real return and determining if the other one was fake.

Notify credit bureaus

If someone has cloned your identity enough to steal your tax refund check, they may also have enough information to also open new credit accounts in your name. That's why your next step should be to set up fraud alerts with the three major credit reporting bureaus: Equifax, Experian and TransUnion.

The alerts warn potential creditors or lenders that you have been the victim of identity theft and that they have to verify your identity before issuing you credit. This is another reason to file a police report.

Fraud alerts, which are free, expire after 90 days. After that, if you feel it's warranted, you can set up an additional alert.

If you are really concerned, you can place a credit freeze on your credit history, which will prohibit creditors from accessing your history and thus denying any new credit applications. That's free with a police report, and usually about $10 without one.

Check your credit report

You should also ask each of the three credit agencies for a copy of your credit report so that you can see if anyone has opened any new account in your name. The agencies offer these free once a year, so take advantage of it.

If you see errors in the history, you should dispute the accounts with the credit history agency and also notify the creditor that you didn't open the account.❖