

WHICH HANDS-FREE DEVICE IS RIGHT FOR YOU?

Your guide to hassle-free hands-free compliance with Vermont's new law



We all know that talking on a handheld device while driving is dangerous, but starting October 1st it will be illegal in the state of Vermont. This means you're going to need a hands-free device if you want to chat while you drive. With a wide range of hands-free options out there, you should have no problem finding a device that's compatible with your vehicle, your cell phone, and your budget.

Before You Read On:

Check your owner's manual to see if your vehicle already has a native Bluetooth system. Most new vehicles come prewired with hands-free Bluetooth capability. The manual should provide instruction for pairing your phone to the system.

WIRED HEADSET

Compatibility: Any phone/ Any vehicle

Price: \$10-\$30



Wired headsets are simply headphones or earbuds with a built-in microphone. They plug directly into the AUX input in your cell phone, meaning a Bluetooth-capable phone is not required. This makes wired headsets compatible with essentially every phone. These devices also offer excellent call quality despite their relatively low price, and most units can be used for listening to music. Unfortunately, there are a few downsides. To avoid fumbling around your vehicle for a headset whenever a call comes in, drivers choosing this option should wear the device at all times while driving if they plan on using their cell phone on the road. If this sounds uncomfortable, or if you're someone who hates loose wires and cords, you may want to spring for a Bluetooth device. In sum, wired headsets are a great choice for those with older phones that do not offer Bluetooth connectivity or who are looking for an inexpensive choice.

BLUETOOTH HEADSET

Compatibility: Bluetooth-capable phone required/ Any vehicle

Price: \$30-\$130



Bluetooth headsets connect to your phone wirelessly, and offer superb call quality on the go. Some pricier models even offer noise reduction for those hard of hearing, or those with significant cabin noise. There are five different ways that Bluetooth headsets can fit to your ear:

- A rubber earbud that fits inside the ear
- A loop that slides behind the ear
- A device that clips on the ear
- A neckband
- Headphones (best for those who want to listen to music as well as make calls)

Much like wired headsets, Bluetooth headsets should be worn at all times in the car to avoid distraction when answering calls. Because of this, it is imperative that prospective buyers try on various styles to see what fits their body and their needs. Bluetooth headsets are rechargeable, and buyers should consider battery life when shopping as well. Bluetooth headsets are a great option for those who don't want to end their call when the drive is over.

FM TRANSMITTER



Compatibility: Bluetooth-capable phone required/ Functional car radio, speakers, and cigarette lighter required

Price: \$25-\$125

FM Transmitters plug into your car's cigarette lighter, and stream music and phone calls through your speakers using empty radio frequencies. Unlike headsets, FM Transmitters come with a microphone that attaches to your vehicle, so you don't have to worry about wearing a device on your person. Additionally, you don't have to worry about batteries or recharging since they plug directly into the vehicle, and installation is as easy as inserting the device into the cigarette lighter. While this is an easy solution there are a few major drawbacks. Users must scan to find empty radio frequencies, which may be very distracting for a driver. While some models will search for frequencies automatically, drivers still have to tune the radio to the recommended frequency. Also, FM Transmitters' reliance on radio means they are prone to sound interference, which is tolerable when listening to music, but can be frustrating during phone calls. Prospective buyers should be sure their devices are Bluetooth-capable, since many transmitters are designed only for music streaming. Buyers should also make sure the device will not interfere with their vehicle's shifter.

AUX KIT



Compatibility: Bluetooth-capable phone required/ Functional speakers required/ AUX input required (although AUX cassette adapters can be used in vehicles with tape decks)

Price: About \$25

AUX kits offer the same convenience and ease of installation as FM transmitters, with sound quality comparable to Bluetooth-capable stereo systems. Kits typically consist of a dash-mounted microphone and an AUX cable. Simply plug your phone into the AUX input, pair with the kit, and you're ready to go. Many kits allow you to control your phone via buttons on the microphone, making it easier to keep your focus on the road. Also, most kits do double-duty, allowing users to play music from their device through their speakers. Battery life can be an issue, but some models plug into the cigarette lighter if you don't mind loose cords.

SPEAKERPHONE



Compatibility: Bluetooth-capable phone required/ Any vehicle

Price: \$25-\$80

Speakerphones are small, portable speaker/microphone devices that clip to your vehicle's visor, allowing you to stream music and make phone calls wirelessly without using your stereo system. Installation is as easy as clipping the device to your visor, and pairing with your phone. Sound quality is generally good, and many units offer voice dialing and texting for a true hands-free experience. The cordless design makes for a clean, neat cabin space, but comes at the cost of battery life. Speakerphones are a great choice for people who drive multiple vehicles and need a device that can easily be switched from car-to-car. They're also great for those with old or dysfunctional stereo systems, who don't want the inconvenience of wearing a headset.

Bluetooth Head Unit



Compatibility: Bluetooth-capable phone required/ Functional stereo system/ Compatible stereo slot

Note: The standard head unit size, known as single DIN, measures 2x7 inches. Most vehicles are compatible with single or double DIN (4x7 inches) head units, and installation kits make it simple to install a single DIN unit to any size opening.

Price: \$50-\$150 with additional costs for professional installation

Upgrading to a Bluetooth-capable head unit (the stereo interface in your vehicle's cabin) gives you the same benefits as owning a Bluetooth-capable vehicle, without having to buy a new car. You can have phone conversations and stream music wirelessly from your device directly through the stereo system. Generally speaking, call quality is good, and many units will improve your stereo's music quality as well. Most units offer additional features like CD players, AUX inputs, and USB ports. The downside is that head units require the most complex installation of any hands-free solution. You will most likely want this done professionally, meaning you will need to pay for installation on top of the relatively high unit price. This also means that head units cannot be switched from vehicle-to-vehicle very easily. That said, Bluetooth-capable head units are a great option for those who want great music and call quality, without exposed wires or cords.

As you can see, there are plenty of hands-free options to help you comply with Vermont's ban on cell phone use while driving. With a wealth of additional features, these devices are just as much a convenience as they are a safety measure. Look closely at each option, and find the one that fits you best. If you are forgetful, choose an option that turns on and off automatically with your vehicle. Please keep in mind that hands-free capability is no good if you have to fiddle around with your device or take your eyes off the road. Make safe driving a priority.

