

Cellular Telephones: Health & Safety Issues



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Arguments for and against use of cellular telephones

Cellular telephones, mobile phones, cell phones or “cellies” have been the subject of much controversy as far as their effect on users’ health and safety are concerned. Yet they have become increasingly popular and it is predicted that by the year 2005, there will be some 1.5 billion users worldwide.

Cell phones have become more popular because of their:

- Increased convenience
- Aid in crises and emergencies
- Ability to reduce emergency response time
- Potential role in apprehension of crime

Cellular telephone calls are usually more expensive than calls from conventional phones, and, studies have also queried their responsibility for:

- Health problems including Brain Cancer, Increased Blood Pressure Levels, Changes in Brain Activity, & Reaction Time, Headaches and Sleep Patterns
- Infertility
- Traffic accidents
- Interference with medical devices such as cardiac pacemakers and hearing aids
- Interference with aircraft navigation systems

However, with the exception of their role in interfering with aircraft electronics and medical equipment, there is no conclusive scientific evidence so far (year 2001) that confirms a causal relationship between the use of cell phones and the other problems identified above.

Electromagnetic Radiation / Radio Frequency (RF) Fields

The main concerns relate to whether or not exposure to electromagnetic radiation radio or radio frequency (RF) emissions from such wireless devices and their base

stations will adversely affect the health of users. RF energy is emitted from electrical devices and produces heat which may be absorbed into the body. However, scientists have argued that the body's normal heat processes is able to regulate the heat emitted from cell phones. For these phones, RF energy is only transmitted when a call is being made.

There are other items, which emit electromagnetic waves such as computers, television sets, alarm systems and microwaves.

However, research has centered mainly around the cell phone because of claims of its link to various health and safety problems, including traffic accidents caused by distracted driving.

Research has suggested that potential health risks increase if the mobile unit is used for 20 to 30 minutes or more at any point in time.

Base Stations

These are low-powered radio antennae, usually mounted on buildings or towers, constructed to facilitate the use of cell phones. They transmit signals similar to those of radio and television broadcast antennae and they communicate with mobile users' handsets.

There are international guidelines surrounding base stations, including suggestions that they should be:

- fenced in for the protection of citizens
- erected in consultation with the community and local Councils
- located away from play grounds, kindergartens, and areas where small children gather.

Ongoing Research

A number of international agencies are conducting ongoing research and it is expected that by 2004 to 2005, more conclusive evidence should be available.

However, given the information gaps and other uncertainties, there should be compliance with standards governing base stations, manufacturing of cell phones, their sale and use by the public.

Advice to Concerned Consumers

To date, the scientific studies conducted in respect of cell phones have not found any conclusive or strong enough evidence to conclude that these phones

in and of themselves create health and safety risks. However, given the research gaps, consumers who remain concerned may take the following precautions:

- ☐ Limit the use of cell phones to essential calls
- ☐ Make the conversations short
- ☐ Opt for “hands free” phones and external antennae to keep the device away from the head and body
- ☐ Stay on top of the results of ongoing scientific studies
- ☐ Find out about standards compliance

Consumers should also be wary of marketers who prey on people’s fear of radiation, offering fraudulent devices for sale with claims that they protect from RF exposure. These include pendants, lingerie and shields.

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