

Skip navigation

Learn About Cancer

Find information and resources for a specific cancer topic

[Learn About Cancer](#)

[What Causes Cancer?](#)

[Other Carcinogens](#)

[At Home](#)

Cellular Phone Towers

Cellular (cell) phones first became widely available in the United States in the 1990s, but their use has increased dramatically since then. The widespread use of cell phones has led to the placement of cell phone towers in many communities. These towers, also called base stations, consist of electronic equipment and antennas that receive and transmit radiofrequency (RF) signals.

How do cellular phone towers work?

Cell phone base stations may be free standing towers or mounted on existing structures, such as trees, water tanks, or tall buildings. The antennas need to be located high enough so they can adequately cover the area. Base stations usually range in height from 50-200 feet.

Cell phones communicate with nearby cell towers mainly through radiofrequency (RF) waves, a form of energy in the electromagnetic spectrum between FM radio waves and microwaves. Like FM radio waves, microwaves, visible light, and heat, they are forms of non-ionizing radiation. This means they cannot cause cancer by directly damaging DNA. RF waves are different from stronger types of radiation such as x-rays, gamma rays, and ultraviolet (UV) light, which can break the chemical bonds in DNA.

At very high levels, RF waves can heat up body tissues. (This is the basis for how microwave ovens work.) But the levels of energy used by cell phones and towers are much lower.

When a person makes a cell phone call, a signal is sent from the phone's antenna to the nearest base station antenna. The base station responds to this signal by assigning it an available radiofrequency channel. RF waves transfer the voice information to the base station. The voice signals are then sent to a switching center, which transfers the call to its destination. Voice signals are then relayed back and forth during the call.

How are people exposed to the energy from cellular phone towers?

As people use cell phones to make calls, signals are transmitted back and forth to the base station. The RF waves produced at the base station are given off into the environment, where people can be exposed to them.

The energy from a cellular phone tower antenna, like that of other telecommunication antennas, is directed toward the horizon (parallel to the ground), with some downward scatter. Base station antennas use higher power levels than other types of land-mobile antennas, but much lower levels than those from radio and television broadcast stations. The amount of energy decreases rapidly with increasing distance from the antenna. As a result, the level of exposure to radio waves at ground level is very low compared to the level close to the antenna.

Public exposure to radio waves from cell phone tower antennas is slight for several reasons. The power levels are relatively low, the antennas are mounted at high above ground level, and the signals are transmitted intermittently, rather than constantly.

At ground level near typical cellular base stations, the amount of RF energy is thousands of times less than the limits for safe exposure set by the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) and other regulatory authorities. It is very unlikely that a person could be exposed to RF levels in excess of these limits just by being near a cell phone tower.

When cellular antennas are mounted on rooftops, it is possible that a person on the roof could be exposed to RF levels greater than those typically encountered on the ground. But even then, exposure levels approaching or exceeding the FCC safety guidelines are only likely to be found very close to and directly in front of the antennas. If this is the case, access to these areas should be limited.

The level of RF energy inside buildings where a base station is mounted is typically much lower than the level outside depending on the construction materials of the building. Wood or cement block reduces the exposure level of RF radiation by a factor of about 10. The energy level *behind* an antenna is hundreds to thousands of times lower than in front. Therefore, if an antenna is mounted on the side of a building, the exposure level in the room directly behind the wall is typically well below the recommended exposure limits.

Do cellular phone towers cause cancer?

Some people have expressed concern that living, working, or going to school

near a cell phone tower might increase the risk of cancer or other health problems. At this time, there is very little evidence to support this idea. In theory, there are some important points that would argue against cellular phone towers being able to cause cancer.

First, the energy level of radiofrequency (RF) waves is relatively low, especially when compared with the types of radiation that are known to increase cancer risk, such as gamma rays, x-rays, and ultraviolet (UV) light. The energy of RF waves given off by cell phone towers is not enough to break chemical bonds in DNA molecules, which is how these stronger forms of radiation may lead to cancer.

A second issue has to do with wavelength. RF waves have long wavelengths, which can only be concentrated to about an inch or two in size. This makes it unlikely that the energy from RF waves could be concentrated enough to affect individual cells in the body.

Third, even if RF waves were somehow able to affect cells in the body at higher doses, the level of RF waves present at ground level is very low -- well below the recommended limits. Levels of energy from RF waves near cell phone towers are not significantly different than the background levels of RF radiation in urban areas from other sources, such as radio and television broadcast stations.

For these reasons, most scientists agree that cell phone antennas or towers are unlikely to cause cancer.

Studies in people

Very few human studies have focused specifically on cellular phone towers and cancer risk. In the largest study published to date, British researchers compared a group of more than 1,000 families of young children with cancer against a similar group of families of children without cancer. They found no link between a mother's exposure to the towers during pregnancy (based on the distance from the home to the nearest tower and on the amount of energy given off by nearby towers) and the risk of early childhood cancer.

The amount of exposure from living near a cell phone tower is typically many times lower than the exposure from using a cell phone. About 30 studies have looked at possible links between cell phone use and tumors in people. Most studies to date have not found a link between cell phone use and the development of tumors, although these studies have had some important limitations. This is an area of active research. For more information, see the document, *Cellular Phones*.

Studies done in the lab

Laboratory studies have looked at whether the types of RF waves used in cell phone communication can cause DNA damage. Most of these studies have

supported the idea that the RF waves given off by cell phones and towers don't have enough energy to damage DNA directly.

Some scientists have reported that the RF waves may produce other effects in human cells (in lab dishes) that might possibly help tumors grow. However, these studies have not been verified. Several studies in rats and mice have looked at whether RF energy might promote the development of tumors caused by other known carcinogens (cancer-causing agents). These studies did not find evidence of tumor promotion. Research in this area continues.

What expert agencies say

The 3 expert agencies that usually classify cancer-causing exposures (carcinogens) -- the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), the National Toxicology Program (NTP), and the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) -- have not classified cell phone towers as to their cancer-causing potential.

According to the World Health Organization:

Considering the very low exposure levels and research results collected to date, there is no convincing scientific evidence that the weak RF signals from base stations and wireless networks cause adverse health effects.

In commenting on cell phone towers near homes or schools, the Federal Communications Commission states:

Radiofrequency emissions from antennas used for cellular and PCS [personal communications service] transmissions result in exposure levels on the ground that are typically thousands of times below safety limits. These safety limits were adopted by the FCC based on the recommendations of expert organizations and endorsed by agencies of the Federal Government responsible for health and safety. Therefore, there is no reason to believe that such towers could constitute a potential health hazard to nearby residents or students.

Do cellular phone towers cause any other health problems?

While high levels of RF waves can cause a warming of body tissues, the energy levels on the ground near a cell phone tower are far below the levels needed to cause this effect. Thus far, there is no evidence in published scientific reports that cell phone towers cause any other health problems.

Can I limit my exposure?

Cell phone towers are not known to cause any health effects. But if you are concerned about possible exposure from a cell phone tower near your home or office, you can ask a government agency or private firm to measure the RF field strength near the tower to ensure that it is within the acceptable range.

What should I do if I've been exposed to cellular phone towers?

There is no test to measure whether you have been exposed to RF radiation from cellular phone towers. But as noted above, most researchers and regulatory authorities do not believe that cell phone towers pose health risks under ordinary conditions. If you have additional health concerns, please consult your doctor.

Additional resources

More information from your American Cancer Society

The following related information may also be helpful to you. These materials may be viewed on our Web site or ordered from our toll-free number, at 1-800-227-2345.

Cellular Phones

Known and Probable Human Carcinogens

Radiation Exposure and Cancer

National organizations and Web sites*

In addition to the American Cancer Society, other sources of information and support include:

Environmental Protection Agency

Home page: www.epa.gov

Understanding radiation: www.epa.gov/radiation/understanding-radiation-overview.html

Federal Communications Commission

RF Safety Program, Office of Engineering and Technology

Web site: www.fcc.gov/oet/rfsafety

Food and Drug Administration

Home page: www.fda.gov

Radiation-emitting products: Cell phones: www.fda.gov/Radiation-EmittingProducts/RadiationEmittingProductsandProcedures/HomeBusinessandEntertainment/CellPhones/default.htm

National Cancer Institute

Toll-free number: 1-800-422-6237 (1-800-4-CANCER)

Home page: www.cancer.gov

Cellular telephone use and cancer risk: www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Risk/cellphones

National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences

Home page: www.niehs.nih.gov

Electric and magnetic fields: www.niehs.nih.gov/health/topics/agents/emf/index.cfm

World Health Organization

Electromagnetic fields and public health: base stations and wireless technologies

Web site: www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs304/en/index.html

** Inclusion on this list does not imply endorsement by the American Cancer Society*

No matter who you are, we can help. Contact us anytime, day or night, for information and support. Call us at 1-800-227-2345 or visit www.cancer.org.

References

ANSI-C95.1, 1982, American National Standards Institute. American national standard safety levels with respect to human exposure to radiofrequency electromagnetic fields, 300 kHz to 100 Ghz. New York: IEEE.

Elliott P, Toledano MB, Bennett J, et al. Mobile phone base stations and early childhood cancers: case-control study. *BMJ*. 2010;340:c3077. [Epub ahead of print]

Federal Communications Commission, Office of Engineering and Technology. Radio Frequency Safety. 2009. Accessed at www.fcc.gov/oet/rfsafety/rf-faqs.html on February 22, 2010.

IEEE-C95.1, 1991, Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, Inc. Safety levels with respect to human exposure to radio frequency electromagnetic fields, 3 kHz to 300 Ghz. Piscataway, NJ: IEEE.

IEEE: Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, Inc. Human exposure to RF emissions from cellular radio base station antennas; Washington, DC: 1992.

ICNIRP: International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection. Health Issues related to the use of hand-held radiotelephones and base transmitters. *Health Physics*. 1996;70:587-593.

IRPA, 1988, International Radiation Protection Association. Guidelines on limits of exposure to radio frequency electromagnetic fields. IEEE United States Activities, COMAR, Washington, DC.

NCRP, 1986, National Council on Radiation Protection. Biological effects and exposure criteria for radiofrequency electromagnetic fields. Report 86, (Bethesda, MD: National Council on Radiation Protection and Measurements) pp. 1-382.

Rothman KJ, Chung-Kwang C, Morgan R, et al. Assessment of cellular telephone and other radio frequency exposure for epidemiologic research. *Epidemiology*. 1996;7:291-298.

Valberg PA. Radio frequency radiation (RFR): the nature of exposure and carcinogenic potential. *Cancer Causes Control*. 1997;8:323-332.

Wolf R, Wolf D. Increased incidence of cancer near a cell-phone transmitter station. *Int J Cancer Prevention* 2004;1:123-128.

World Health Organization (WHO). Electromagnetic fields and public health: base stations and wireless technologies. 2006. Accessed at www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs304/en/index.html on February 23, 2010.

Last Medical Review: 06/25/2010

Last Revised: 06/25/2010