

Government must inform us of cell phone risk

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A huge, 30-year study called COSMOS has been launched in Europe to determine whether cell phones cause cancer and other health problems. Meanwhile, policymakers in Sacramento are considering legislation to ensure people know how much radiation their cell phones emit. The wireless industry vigorously opposes such legislation. It argues that its phones comply with regulations, and there is no consensus about risks so people don't need to know this. Our research review published in the Journal of Clinical Oncology found alarming results to the contrary.

We reviewed 23 case-control studies that examined tumor risk due to cell phone use. Although as a whole the data varied, among the 10 higher quality studies, we found a harmful association between phone use and tumor risk. The lower quality studies, which failed to meet scientific best practices, were primarily industry funded.

The 13 studies that investigated cell phone use for 10 or more years found a significant harmful association with tumor risk, especially for brain tumors, giving us ample reason for concern about long-term use.

Do federal regulations adequately protect the public? The 1996 Federal Communications Commission regulations are based upon the Specific Absorption Rate (SAR), a measure of heat generated by six minutes of cell phone exposure in an artificial model that represents a 200-pound man's brain. Although every cell phone model has a SAR, the industry doesn't make it easy to find it. Moreover, children, and adults who weigh less than 200 pounds, are exposed to more radiation than our government deems "safe."

It is time to revamp the FCC regulations. Laboratory scientists have found harmful effects from cell phones that emit less radiation than the FCC standard. Moreover, some scientists believe that cell phones' heat transfer is not what we should fear. These researchers have found that variation in the frequencies emitted by cell phones may be hazardous.

We should address this issue proactively even if we do not fully understand its magnitude. Our government has faced similar public health threats in the past. In 1965, although there was no scientific consensus about the harmful effects of cigarettes, Congress required a precautionary warning label on cigarette packages: "Cigarette Smoking May Be Hazardous to Your Health." More specific warnings were not required until 1984: "Smoking Causes Lung Cancer, Heart Disease, Emphysema, And May Complicate Pregnancy."

Should we have waited 19 years until absolutely certain before we informed the public about these risks?

Although more research on cell phone radiation is needed, we cannot afford to wait. There are 285 million cell phones in use in this country, and two-thirds of children over the age of seven use them. Manufacturers bury the SAR within their owner's manuals, along with safety instructions to keep your phone up to an inch away from your body.

Nine nations have issued precautionary warnings. It is time for our government to require health warnings and publicize simple steps to reduce the health risks of cell phone use.

Joel M. Moskowitz is director of the Center for Family and Community Health in UC Berkeley's School of Public Health. Diana McDonnell and Gene Kazinets collaborated on this commentary and the research review. To see five ways to use your cell phone safely, go to <http://sfg.ly/c0Fy9y>.