

Cellphones may pose risk to kids

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ROBIN NOWACKI/AP FILE

A bioengineering professor from the University of Washington has expressed concern about the impact of cellphones on children because young skulls are thinner and the growing brain may be more susceptible to radiation.

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Long-term effects of radiation unclear

Little research has focused on children
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ASSOCIATED PRESS

SEATTLE—Parents should think twice before giving in to a middle-schooler's demands for a cellphone, some scientists say, because potential long-term health risks remain unclear. Researchers have speculated for more than 10 years that the electromagnetic radiation emitted from cellphones may damage DNA and cause benign brain tumours, said Henry Lai, a bioengineering professor at the University of Washington.

"We don't know very much about the health effects of cellphone use on kids, but there are speculations," Lai said. In Britain, the chairman of the National Radiological Protection Board advised in January that parents should not give mobile phones to children age 8 or younger as a precaution against the potential harm of radiation from the devices.

When you use a cellphone, 70 to 80 per cent of the energy emitted from the antenna is absorbed by the head, Lai said. Last week, a federal appeals court in Maryland reinstated five class-action lawsuits claiming that the cellphone industry has failed to protect consumers from unsafe levels of radiation.

Several research studies have pointed to the potential impacts of long-term absorption of cellphone-emitted radiation but little of the research has focused on the children. Lai said he was concerned about the impact on children because young skulls are thinner and the growing brain may be more susceptible to radiation. He also said that because brain tumours usually take 30 to 40 years to develop, children who use cellphones from their teen years onward would have a longer period of time to see a cumulative impact. "We don't know if kids are really more susceptible," Lai said, but he encourages everyone to use a headset to keep the antenna away from the brain, "even if they're not cool." Most research on the subject has stopped in the United States except for some work supported by the cellphone industry, he added. Independent studies continue in Europe. A Swedish study published in October suggested that people who use a cellphone for at least 10 years might increase their risk of developing a rare benign tumour along a nerve on the side of the head where they hold the phone.

The study's subjects had been using cellphones for at least 10 years, nearly all analogue models that emit more electromagnetic radiation than the digital models now on the market. Digital phones emit radiation in pulses; the older analogue varieties emit continuous waves. Since cellphones exploded in popularity in the late 1990s, most of those sold used digital technology.

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