

Can your mobile phone damage your health?

For debate



Locals protest against a newly erected TETRA mast in their village

We are all bathed in the radio waves which spread out from mobile phones and masts. How would you set about finding out if this radiation is harming us?

Box 1 TETRA

The emergency services are making increased use of the Terrestrial Trunked Radio (TETRA) system. This is a mobile phone system with a difference – the strength of the signal varies with a frequency of about 17 Hz. There have been campaigns across the country against this, following reports of adverse health effects.

Box 2 Useful website

The Health Protection Agency Radiation Protection Board reports to the government on mobile phone safety. For the latest report, see its website:

www.hpa.org.uk/radiation

YES

Concerned parent

‘There’s a proposal to put a phone mast on the roof of my daughter’s school. She’ll be exposed to radiation all day long.’

The radiation from a mast is very weak, provided your daughter is at least 2 m away from it. If she is using a phone of her own, the radiation entering her head will be much more intense.

Protester

‘There’s a case of a woman who has had dizzy spells ever since a TETRA mast was sited near her house. She can see it from her bedroom window.’

Do we know if her health problems started after the mast was switched on? There are many causes of such symptoms.

Official report

‘Children may be more vulnerable because of their developing nervous system. In line with our precautionary approach, we believe that the widespread use of mobile phones by children for non-essential calls should be discouraged.’

Most calls made by children are non-essential.

NO

Complacent citizen

‘With so many phones in use, we would surely have noticed by now if they caused cancer.’

There are many possible causes of cancer. It would take a proper scientific survey to determine whether cancer rates were being increased by mobile phone use.

Scientist

‘We don’t know of any mechanism by which the radio waves used by phones could cause cancer.’

We wouldn’t expect the low-energy radiation of radio waves to cause cancer, but there might be some mechanism we haven’t thought of.

Scientific report

‘There is no evidence that the use of mobile phones is leading to increased cancer rates.’

There might be a sub-group of the population who are more susceptible to the effects of low-intensity radiation. Should a small number of people be put in danger for the benefit of others?