

## For years we were told cellphones are safe

## Now we're told they might be hazardous

**Brain cancer?:** Debate rages over whether radiofrequency energy increases risk of tumors

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Cellphones could be just as carcinogenic as the pesticide DDT or gasoline engine exhaust, a World Health Organization panel said Tuesday after reviewing dozens of published studies.

While studies so far do not show definitively that cellphone use increases cancer risk, "limited" scientific evidence exists to suggest that the radiofrequency energy released by cellphones may increase the risk of two types of cancers: glioma, a type of brain cancer, and acoustic neuroma, a tumor of the nerve that runs from the ear to the brain, according to the International Agency for Research on Cancer, which develops scientific cancer-prevention strategies for the WHO.

Scientists have long debated the potential cancer risk linked to cellphone use, but this statement marks the first time an independent group of scientists has taken anything other than a neutral stand.

"My first reaction was, 'But, of course,'" said Blake Levitt, a science

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# Scientists debate health risks of cellphones

journalist from Warren who has followed the evolution of cellphones. "The information has been there for a very long time."

But others say the panel's new classification of cellphones does not mean they cause cancer.

IARC ruled that cellphones were "possibly carcinogenic," the third-strongest designation on its carcinogen rating scale. The agency's other four categories for substances or agents are: carcinogenic to humans, probably carcinogenic to humans, not classifiable and probably not carcinogenic to humans.

"IARC conducts numerous reviews and in the past has given the same score to, for example, pickled vegetables and coffee," said John Walls, vice president

for public affairs for CTIA-The Wireless Association, an industry group. "This IARC classification does not mean cellphones cause cancer."

Bridgeport Hospital neurosurgeon Kenneth Lipow said before anyone throws out their cellphone, they should know it's a "very tenuous" link.

"There aren't any really good medical studies that absolutely prove there is a medical connection, and they put it in the same category as smog," Lipow said.

If anything, cellphones pose a safety issue, not a disease issue, he said. Many more people are hurt in distracted driving incidents than by the brain tumors they may cause, he said.

Kenneth Dressler, chief of oncology and hematology at St. Vincent's Medical Center in

Bridgeport, said existing studies have only examined the cellphone usage of people who already have brain cancer. He said a random sample of cellphone users should be followed over time to see how many develop brain cancer.

## Cellphone safety

The World Health Organization's recommendations for reducing cellphone exposure:

- Use "hands-free" devices, which keep mobile phones away from the head and body during phone calls.
- Limit the number and length of calls.
- Using phone in areas of good reception also decreases exposure, as it allows the phone to transmit at reduced power.

Because brain cancer tends to be slow growing and cellphone technology is just more than a decade old, it will take a few more decades until any substantial conclusions can be drawn, said Tarek Sobh, vice president of research at the University of Bridgeport.

Many cellphone users said they would not change their habits because of the panel's recommendation.

Teacher Judy Savitt, 71, of Bridgeport, said she thought the IARC's recommendation was blown out of proportion.

"At my age, it's not going to make any difference," she said.

Fairfield University student Craig Borge, 21, said he ignored the findings. "I don't really pay attention to that stuff that much," Borge said. "I don't really have enough knowledge about it. I'm not too worried about it."

Even if cellphones were directly linked to cancer, recent college graduate Sarah Tung, 23, of Fairfield, said she was unlikely to use her phone any less.

"It's my lifeline," said Tung who sleeps with the phone next to her pillow. "I go everywhere with it. It's how I talk to everybody. I don't know what I would do without it."

*An Associated Press report was used in this story.*