

Management Advice

Mobile Phones do not increase the risk of Brain Cancer or Headaches.....Or do they?

Government and Industry Advisors continue to attempt to reassure us that mobile phones are not associated with a raised risk of brain cancer. Two studies have been completed in the UK as part of an international investigation into mobile phone use and the possibility of brain cancer. These studies have involved almost 1,000 patients with brain cancer and they concluded that there was “no association between brain cancer and mobile phone use.”

Some people are reported as being sensitive to mobile phone signals and a further recent study in the UK looked into this. The conclusions were that there was no link between an increased frequency of headaches and mobile phone use.

There are more than 50 Million mobile phones in use in the United Kingdom. In 2000 the UK Independent Expert Group on Mobile Phones (IEGMP) published the Stewart report. This report recommended a programme of research and a precautionary approach to the use of mobile phones, particularly in children. As a result of the recommendations of the Stewart report a research programme was launched in 2001 with a budget of £7.36m and this was jointly funded by the UK Government and the Mobil Phone Industry. The two recently completed research projects are part of this initiative.

The recent brain cancer study however, had certain limitations and illustrates the difficulty in estimating how much an individual uses their mobile phone over a number of years. Technology has also changed, we no longer use analogue phones and are now using digital equipment. The question has to be asked as whether this changes the risk? In addition, there still seems to be some uncertainty in estimating the exposure to radiation, that the phone gives an individual.

There would seem to be no obvious biological mechanism for causing cancer from radio frequency radiation produced by a mobile phone. There is therefore, in theory, no relation between mobile phone use and the development of brain cancers. The problem for the doctors in this field, is that there is a very long time lapse between exposure from the mobile phone and the development of the cancer. This is known as the latency period. When one looks at other causes of cancer caused by radiation, or other environmental factors, the latency period may well be between 20 and 30 years. Within the UK, mobile phones have only been common in our society for approximately 10 years. We would therefore suggest that a longer

period of surveillance needs to occur before we can be absolutely sure with regards to the safety of mobile phones. There has been some evidence to suggest that other forms of cancers involving the salivary gland or nerve surrounding the ear, may well be related to mobile phone use; however, at the moment, the link is very tenuous.

At the present time the best advice from an occupational health perspective, is that mobile phones should be used whenever possible in a hands free scenario and that their use should be limited to essential use only.

Some individuals report the phenomenon of “electro magnetic hypersensitivity”. This is the development of headaches, nausea, fatigue, dizziness, loss of memory, or poor concentration, precipitated by exposure to electro magnetic radiation from a mobile phone. In Sweden, the symptoms of this condition are accepted as a physical impairment and a national scheme is in place to improve both the working conditions and the home life of such sufferers. The recent study, published in the UK, did not show a link between exposure to mobile phone radiation and the development of such symptoms. The study exposed such sufferers to mobile phone radiation and also to mobile phones, which were switched off. The symptoms were the same in each case!

To conclude, the jury is still out on the health effects of mobile phones. Certainly the current information would suggest that the use of mobile phones is not risk free. However, at the present time, with our current knowledge, the risk of a regular mobile phone user developing brain cancer is “fleetingly small”. The health council in the Netherlands has gone as far as to say that there is no reason to recommend that phone use by children should be limited and that there is no need to apply any precautionary principles. In the UK, as usual, we are slightly more cautious.

It is important to realise that there is an established risk of mobile phone use to people when driving. It is true that hand held mobile phones have been illegal when driving since 2003, but that hands free systems are still allowed. Many groups feel that this is an anomaly and that if one is using a hands free system when driving at speed on a motorway, ones concentration and reaction times are reduced and that therefore this still poses a significant health risk.

Such issues may well need to be considered within each organisation, particularly as mobile phone use and mobile phone use while driving remains a significant activity. If you have any questions with regards to this article, please do not hesitate to contact us at Preventative Healthcare, our email address is <mailto:talktous@phcohealth.co.uk> our direct line telephone number is 01622 775285.

NEW CLINIC

PHC now has a new clinic at Theale, Reading in Berkshire.

If you would like one of your employees seen at our new Heathrow venue, please Contact your PHC Contract Support Administrator who will make the necessary arrangements.

