

Brain damage

by Niall McKay on 01 October 2000, 00:00

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Topics: brain , damage

Since the first yuppies held brick-size cell phones to their ears, the question has loomed. Do cell phones cause brain damage to the 200 million people who use them? The Swedish say yes, the Americans say no, and the British say maybe but don't give them to children. Some say you're more likely to die from using a cell phone while driving than from brain cancer.

According to a 1997 Canadian report published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, drivers using cell phones are as inattentive as drunk drivers. And safety experts at Aston University in Birmingham, Alabama, say the danger does not end until ten minutes after hanging up because the user is still mulling over the conversation.

The jury's still out on traffic safety, but as far as cancer is concerned, the popular belief in the United States is that cell phones are harmless. According to the [Federal Communications Commission](#), the [Food and Drug Administration](#), the [Occupational Safety and Health Administration](#), and the [Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers](#), cell phone radiation levels are well within the acceptable minimums for exposure.

FCC guidelines mandate that the specific absorption rate -- the amount of heat transferred from the cell phone to the user's head -- cannot exceed 1.6 watts per kilogram. "That gives users about a fiftyfold safety margin," according to Jerry Ulcek, electronic engineer with the FCC. "Despite the fact that almost all the evidence proves that cell phones are safe we continue to fund research and unlike other industries we encourage the researchers to publish their findings," says Peter Harrison, [Nokia's](#) director of electromagnetic issues.

But Swedish medical investigators say that cell phone users, especially of older analog phones (the type most common in the United States), are at increased risk of developing brain tumors, which are most likely to appear on the side of the head where users hold their phones. The report was based on a two-year evaluation of the cases of 233 patients with brain tumors.

Then in June, a British government inquiry headed by Sir William Stewart found no evidence that cell phones damaged human health -- and no evidence that they did not. However, the Stewart Report recommended that widespread use among children should be discouraged.

In short, the Stewart Report was about as useful as an ashtray on a motorcycle. The real question is whom to trust: the Americans, the British, or the Swedish? Here's a hint. Think Volvo.