

Toronto Public Health Department warns about cell phones for kids

Dial back cellphone use, city officials tell parents

<http://healthzone.ca/health/article/459099>

The Star, 12/07/2008

Toronto Public Health is asking parents to think twice before giving their children cellphones.

In what is believed to be the first policy of its kind in Canada, the agency is advising children and teens to limit the time they spend on cellphones until more is known about potential health effects.

The report from the city's medical officer of health recommends "children, especially pre-adolescent children, use land lines whenever possible, keeping the use of cellphones for essential purposes only, limiting the length of cellphone calls and using headsets or hands-free options, whenever possible."

Citing a dearth of research on cellphone use among children and the rising popularity of the devices, the health agency said the possibility that children and teens need greater protection from cellphone radio frequencies couldn't be ruled out.

"While scientists were pretty dismissive of any risk years ago, with the accumulation of studies, it appears people who have been using their phones for a long period of time are at greater risk of certain kinds of brain tumours. There is a pattern emerging," said Loren Vanderlinden, a Toronto Public Health supervisor and the report's author.

"We think it's responsible to limit children's exposure," said Vanderlinden, a mother of two boys, aged 9 and 5, neither of whom carries a cellphone. "Generally, calls should be limited to five or 10 minutes."

Children have smaller heads and thinner skulls than adults. Some studies, using computer image modelling, show signals radiate farther into children's heads than adults. And because children today begin using cellphones at an earlier age than any other generation, exposure will be far greater over their lifetimes.

In Canada, 61 per cent of 12- to 19-year-olds have a cellphone, according to recent data from Solutions Research Group. There are no Canadian statistics on users under 12.

Industry officials vigorously deny any harmful effects from their products. "The state of the science is that there are no health effects," said Marc Choma, a spokesperson for the Canadian Wireless Telecommunications Association, adding that if parents "wish to take a precautionary approach to cellphone use by their children, that's their decision."

Toronto Public Health's advisory follows similar precautionary policies introduced in the U.K., Belgium, Germany, France and Russia.

U.K. health officials publicly discouraged the non-essential use of cellphones by children four years ago. They have also urged the cellphone industry to refrain from marketing their products to children – a widespread practice in North America where phones' cartoonish images lure youngsters.

Meanwhile, Health Canada has remained publicly silent on cellphone risks to children, issuing no warnings despite internal concerns dating back to the late 1990s.

A 2005 Star probe cited internal Health Canada documents dating back to 1998, obtained under access to information legislation, that state "children are at highest risk from (radio frequency) exposures."

Cellphones, says another internal memo "have been linked to increasing incidence of childhood leukemia, brain and other cancers of the head and neck, memory problems, stress and migraine/neurological

ailment."In a written response to questions yesterday, a Health Canada spokesperson said: "Health Canada currently sees no scientific reason to consider the use of cellphones as unsafe."

Martin Weatherall, director of the grassroots organization Wireless Electrical and Electromagnetic Pollution and a former Toronto police officer, hailed Toronto Public Health's new policy as a "brave" first step. But he urged more action.

"I would also suggest that cordless telephones and Wi-Fi and wireless games should be included in their recommendations for avoidance by children, and that these devices should not be used in close proximity to children," he said.

The biggest study to date on potential cellphone health effects is the 13-country Interphone project, coordinated by the World Health Organization's International Agency for Research on Cancer. It focuses on head and neck cancers.

Results released from some individual countries have hinted at increased cancer risks after 10 years or more of cellphone use.

"We do see something there," Israeli scientist Dr. Siegal Sadetzki told the Star. But Interphone, she said, only looks at adults from 30 to 59 years old.

"When we started the Interphone study children were not using cellphones."

Elisabeth Cardis, the Canadian scientist who headed up the Interphone project, told French newspaper Le Monde last month that some studies suggesting possible effects of cellphone radiation warrants precaution with children, "though I would not go as far as banning mobile phones."

Meer info: www.beperkdestraling.org