

# Parliamentary report warns cellphones, Wi-Fi a serious health issue

## But several leading Canadian health experts say that cellphones and Wi-Fi devices pose less risk to humans than run-of-the-mill fevers

BY SHARON KIRKEY AND GILLIAN SHAW, POSTMEDIA NEWS AND VANCOUVER SUN    JUNE 18, 2015 5:28 PM

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Cellphones and Wi-Fi could be causing cancer, infertility and learning disabilities, but there is not enough evidence to suggest lowering levels, according to a new Parliamentary report.

**Photograph by:** Justin Sullivan, Getty Images Files

A parliamentary committee has waded into the murky scientific debate over cellphones, warning that the ubiquitous devices may cause cancer, infertility, or learning disabilities and urging parents to shield their children from unnecessary exposure.

But several leading Canadian health experts say that cellphones and Wi-Fi devices pose less risk to humans than run-of-the-mill fevers.

The House of Commons Standing Committee on Health, in a report released this week, urges the federal government to launch a public awareness campaign about the possible hazards and safe use of wireless technologies. The 10-member panel also wants the government to consider funding research into potential links between radiofrequency (RF) electromagnetic radiation exposure and cancer, genetic damage, infertility, development and behaviour problems, and possible harmful effects

to the eyes and brain.

It wants federal workplaces to recognize employees who have "electromagnetic hypersensitivity" and is urging the Canadian Medical Association and other medical bodies to update guidelines on the treatment and diagnosis of the highly controversial condition.

The Conservative-dominated committee also says more efforts should be made to reduce exposure in children under 14.

"The committee agrees that the potential risks of exposure to RF fields are a serious public health issue that needs to be brought to the attention of Canadians so that they have the knowledge to use wireless devices responsibly," reads the report.

But experts say there is no evidence of any harmful effects from RF exposure.

"Right now, we are literally bathing in radiation coming from everywhere — Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, cellular towers, in addition to the usual radio and television broadcasts," said Natalia Nikolova, Canada Research Chair in high-frequency electromagnetics at McMaster University in Hamilton. "I'm not worried at all about short-term exposures, because I can assure you there is no harm."

And B.C.'s top health officer, Dr. Perry Kendall, says there is no scientific evidence that current standards for wireless exposure present a health risk to either children or adults, and he suggested the parliamentary report had been influenced by an advocacy group that disagrees with the findings of a report by the Royal Society of Canada.

"They were reviewing a report that had been undertaken by the Royal Society of Canada, which basically found that there was no convincing evidence, again, for the health concerns that were being raised," said Kendall. "It is sometimes a public policy challenge when you get advocacy groups that are convinced about something going before a political body that doesn't have the background," he said. "So the European parliament and a number of other parliaments have gone against the scientific evidence and have made recommendations or have changed standards.

"I think most of the scientists who look at this wouldn't agree there is a compelling rationale for it."

Dr. Patricia Daly, the chief medical health officer at Vancouver Coastal Health, also reviewed the recommendations in the report and still has no concerns about Wi-Fi expansion in public places including schools, community centres and health care facilities.

The parliamentary committee heard testimony from witnesses over three days of hearings who cited studies linking RF exposure with up to four-fold increases in cancer, as well as a doubling of the risk of glioma, a rare and deadly brain tumour, after just two years exposure to cellphones. Witnesses cited reports of women who developed unusual breast cancers in the same position they kept cellphones tucked into their bras, and of testicular cancers among police officers who had used radar guns to detect speeders, but who "very seldom turned off the guns and just kept them in their laps." Some linked cellphone exposure to increased risks of autism; others said it damages the number and motility

of live sperm.

The health committee concluded that there isn't enough evidence to support further lowering Health Canada's "Code 6" safety limits on radio frequency exposure. But it wants the federal government, provinces and territories to collaborate on collecting data relating to wireless device use and cancer.

The World Health Organization's International Agency for Cancer Research (IACR) has classified RF exposure as a possible human carcinogen. James McNamee, a Health Canada official and member of the IACR, told the health committee some studies found effects on human health, while others didn't, and that "it was impossible to make a causal association at this time."

Nikolova, of McMaster, understands parents are concerned. Cellphone and Wi-Fi usage is increasing every year, and by younger and younger children, she said.

However, "most of the work published around the world points to the lack of harmful effects," she said.

According to Nikola, the only proven effect on humans is heating. A cellphone can warm the body by a fraction of a degree, she said, which is lower than a fever, "and certainly your body can handle that in the short term and recover."

Something may be happening at the cellular level, she said, "but nobody can prove it.

"Of course the public says, 'If you can't prove it, it doesn't mean that it doesn't exist.' And of course, it may exist, and scientists around the world are working on it. But, so far, there is no proof that there are any changes at the cellular level."

B.C.'s Kendall said there is a danger that people who believe they are suffering electromagnetic hypersensitivity (also known as EHS) may have some other underlying condition that they aren't getting treated by doctors because they have made their own diagnosis.

He said if people are worried, they can do things to reduce their exposure, such as using a speakerphone or texting instead of holding a cellphone to their head to talk.

Kerry Crofton, who has a PhD in psychology and is the co-founder and executive director of Doctors for Safer Schools, welcomed the report's recommendations. She said while it won't change current standards, it draws attention to the issue.

"The good news is that this is on the radar screen at all," she said. "Because when we talk to parents and we try and caution them about letting their young children on iPads, etc., understandably their response is if it weren't safe it wouldn't be so prevalent, so it must be safe."

Crofton, author of *A Wellness Guide for the Digital Age*, said the main symptoms of EHS are vertigo, insomnia, ringing in the ears, headaches and cardio symptoms such as tachycardia.

In a telephone interview from her home in Victoria where she talks on a wired phone and connects to the Internet via a wired connection to her computer, Crofton said people should turn off their Wi-Fi at

night, not carry their cellphones on their bodies and not keep their cellphone turned on by their bed at night.

Crofton said the report is calling on health authorities to "do their job."

There are a number of public Wi-Fi hotspots, with Shaw offering 60,000 across B.C. and Alberta. Telus operates 8,000 hot spots, with 1,800 in downtown Vancouver and about 3,700 across Metro Vancouver.

Shawn Hall, a spokesman for Telus said "all Telus sites comply with Safety Code 6 guidelines, and the wireless technology we use is low-powered, typically emitting signals that are significantly lower than Health Canada's safe levels."

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