

Mobile phones may raise cancer risk in children, study finds

Children and teenagers are five times more likely to get brain cancer if they use mobile phones, a new study suggests.

By Sarah Knapton

Researchers are concerned the increase in use of mobiles is creating a health time bomb which will have huge implications in the future.

Professor Lennart Hardell of the University Hospital in Orebro, Sweden, told a conference that the risk of a cancer in the cells which support the central nervous system is dramatically increased in people who start using mobiles before the age of 20.

At least nine out of 10 British 16-year-olds have their own handset, as do more than 40 per cent of primary schoolchildren.

Last week the European Parliament voted 522 to 16 to urge ministers across Europe to bring in stricter limits for exposure to radiation from mobile and cordless phones, Wi-fi and other devices, partly because children are especially vulnerable to them

They are more at risk because their brains and nervous systems are still developing and because – since their heads are smaller and their skulls are thinner – the radiation penetrates deeper into their brains.

But the Government has done almost nothing to discourage mobile phone use amongst youngsters.

Professor Hardell, who believes children under 12 should be banned from using mobiles except in emergencies, said: "This is a warning sign. It is very worrying. We should be taking precautions."

The research has also shown that adults who have used the handsets for more than 10 years are much more likely to get brain cancer.

A study, the Mobile Telecommunications and Health Research Programme, is about to be undertaken, which will follow 90,000 people in Britain but will not include children

Professor David Coggon, the chairman of the programmes management committee, said they had not been included because other research was being done on young people by a study at Sweden's Kariolinska Institute.

He said: "It looks frightening to see a five-fold increase in cancer among people who started use in childhood."

He added that he would be extremely surprised if the risk was shown to be so high once all the evidence was in.

The concerns of Professor Hardell were echoed by David Carpenter, dean of the School of Public Health at the State University of New York who also attended the conference who claimed the effects of mobile phone use in children could be devastating.

"Children are spending significant time on mobile phones," he said, "We may be facing a public health crisis in an epidemic of brain cancers as a result of mobile phone use."

In 2000 and 2005, two official inquiries under Sir William Stewart, a former government chief scientist, recommended the use of mobile phones by children should be "discouraged" and "minimised".

But almost nothing has been done, and their use by the young has more than doubled since the turn of the millennium.

The Swedish scientists want a revision of the emission standard for mobiles and other sources of radiation, which they describe as "inappropriate" and "not safe".

The international standard is designed merely to prevent harmful heating of living tissue or induced electrical currents in the body, and does not take into account the risk of getting cancer.