

For May 23, 2000

Heart to Heart Talk

With Philip S. Chua, M.D.

Cellular Phones and Health

Is the use of cellular phone safe?

So far, it seems to be. While there are some concerns that the use of cellular phones might be harmful to the users, the final word has not been said yet. There are medical investigations currently going on to find out if there are any health risks associated with the use of cellular phones.

What is the current theory?

It is postulated, but not scientifically confirmed, that the frequent and extended use of a cellular phone (where the phone is right at the user's cheek, the earpiece smack against the ear) might be associated with increased incidence of brain cancer. As I have stated, this has not been proven yet. Clinical studies are underway.

How does the cellular phone “cause” harm?

The cellular phone antenna is the “probable culprit” in this unconfirmed medical suspicion. It is theorized that the antenna, which receives electromagnetic waves (EMW) or signals, transmits the same EMW to the brain of the person using the cellular phone (since the unit is in close proximity to the brain), and that these EMW might explain the suspected increase in the incidence of brain cancer among chronic users. Whether this observation is valid or not, we still do not know for sure, but it is only prudent for cellular phone users to take some precautions.

Is one cellular phone worse than the other?

The ones which are with dual band (1800 MHz) are said to be worse than the regular ones with only 900 MHz. Obviously, there are other factors, like length of exposure and proximity of the cellular phone to the brain, etc.

What other illness can cellular phone use cause?

The other condition often mentioned is leukemia. Again, we would like to emphasize that we do not have scientific data to support this suspicion at this time.

Do electrical towers pose the same risk?

Basically, the same claims have been made by some quarters that those who live near electrical towers or power sources or plants are exposed to dangerous levels of electromagnetic waves, which could cause various illnesses. These are also theories that have not been proven.

Are microwave ovens safe?

The normal use of microwave ovens is safe, provided the protective shield is not broken. However, we caution users not to bring their face near the oven door while the oven is on, because the microwaves can harm the eyes by causing premature cataracts. A leaking microwave oven can also affect (inhibit) cardiac pacemakers.

How about television sets?

Since television sets or computer monitors also emit some electromagnetic radiation, it is advisable not to go too close to the TV or monitor. The fact that medical science does not have any evidence that these EMW are harmful does not mean they are totally safe. It is best to be cautious.

Does cellular phone use cause infertility?

There is no factual basis for this concern. We do not have any reason to believe that infertility or impotence can be caused by the use of cellular phones.

How can we make cellular phone use safer?

First and foremost, use cellular phones only as briefly as possible. The lesser the exposure to the EMW the better. The use of “hands-free” devices like earpieces with microphone (about P500) and EMW ear shields (about P150) will help lessen the exposure.

Any health risk in text messaging?

Text messaging, a very popular preoccupation among some people in these days of instant telecommunication, poses no known hazard to physical health, not even to the fingers used in the process. And since the cellular phone is held farther away from the body when text messaging, the exposure to the EMW is less.

Is text-messaging addictive?

There have been cases of psychological dependence on cellular phone text messaging. Abnormal and extreme insecurity and anxiety have been reported among TMAs (Text-Messaging Addicts) when they were deprived of access to their cellular phones even for an hour. And this condition is not as rare as one would think.

Is using cellular phones anti-social?

In legitimate situations where a brief phone call is made using the cellular phone amidst friends (at a dinner or a party) the use of cellular phones are acceptable and proper. However, frequent and excessive use of cellular phones (especially text-messaging) when one is at a restaurant, or even at home, with friends or family is in poor taste and quite rude. Someone we know walked out on her dinner date because he was text messaging almost every 5 minutes, neglecting her. This anti-social behavior is frowned upon in polite society. Dating etiquettes mandate respectful and undivided attention to one's date or longtime friends in public or private places.

Should we abandon the use of cellular phones?

Of course not. Used properly, this technological wonder in today's world of instant telecommunication is invaluable and indispensable. How we got along without it in the past I do not know, but now that we have it, cellular phones are here to stay. They are as much a part of most people's life as their tongue, ears and brain. We now can't live without it.

Our readers are invited to send in their medical questions for possible inclusion in future issues of this column. Mail your questions to the author at Heart to Heart Talk, c/o Cebu Cardiovascular Center, Cebu Doctors' Hospital, Osmena Boulevard, Cebu City, Philippines, or e-mail them to heart@chua.net

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