



## Radio Frequency Safety

FCC > OET > RF Safety > Cellular/PCS RF exposure

### Search:



[Help](#) | [Advanced](#)

### Cellular/PCS RF exposure

Cellular and PCS base stations

Mobile (vehicle-mounted) antennas

Hand-held cellular telephones and PCS devices

Endnotes

### FCC-FDA Website



**Visit the FCC-FDA consumer information wireless phone website.** The FDA and the FCC now provide information about wireless phones at a jointly operated website

## Radio Frequency Safety



Office of Engineering and Technology

### Information On Human Exposure To Radiofrequency Fields From Cellular and PCS Radio Transmitters

#### (1) Cellular and PCS base stations

Radiofrequencies constitute part of the overall electromagnetic spectrum. Cellular communications systems use frequencies in the 800-900 megahertz (MHz) portion of the radiofrequency (RF) spectrum (frequencies formerly used for UHF-TV broadcasting), and transmitters in the Personal Communications Service (PCS) use frequencies in the range of 1850-1990 MHz. Primary antennas for cellular and PCS transmissions are usually located on towers, water tanks and other elevated structures including rooftops and the sides of buildings. The combination of antennas and associated electronic equipment is referred to as a cellular or PCS base station" or "cell site." Typical heights for base station towers or structures are 50-200 feet. A typical cellular base station may utilize several "omni-directional" antennas that look like poles or whips, 10 to 15 feet in length. PCS (and also many cellular) base stations use a number of "sector" antennas that look like rectangular panels. The dimensions of a sector antenna are typically 1 foot by 4 feet. Antennas are usually arranged in three groups of three with one antenna in each group used to transmit signals to mobile units (car phones or hand-held phones). The other two antennas in each group are used to receive signals from mobile units.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) authorizes cellular and PCS carriers in various service areas around the country. At a cell site, the total RF power that could be transmitted from each transmitting antenna at a cell site depends on the number of radio channels (transmitters) that have been authorized and the power of each transmitter. Typically, for a cellular base station, a maximum of 21 channels per sector (depending on the system) could be used. Thus, for a typical cell site utilizing sector antennas, each of the three transmitting antennas could be connected to up to 21 transmitters for a total of 63 transmitters per site. When omni-directional antennas are used, up to 96 transmitters could be implemented at a cell site, but this would be very unusual. While a typical base station could have as many as 63 transmitters, not all of the transmitters would be expected to operate simultaneously thus reducing overall emission levels. For

the case of PCS base stations, fewer transmitters are normally required due to the relatively greater number of base stations.

Although the FCC permits an effective radiated power (ERP) of up to 500 watts per channel (depending on the tower height), the majority of cellular base stations in urban and suburban areas operate at an ERP of 100 watts per channel or less. An ERP of 100 watts corresponds to an actual radiated power of 5-10 watts, depending on the type of antenna used (ERP is not equivalent to the power that is radiated but is a measure of the directional characteristics of the antenna). As the capacity of a system is expanded by dividing cells, i.e., adding additional base stations, lower ERPs are normally used. In urban areas, an ERP of 10 watts per channel (corresponding to a radiated power of 0.5 - 1 watt) or less is commonly used. For PCS base stations, even lower radiated power levels are normally used.

The signal from a cellular or PCS base station antenna is essentially directed toward the horizon in a relatively narrow beam in the vertical plane. For example, the radiation pattern for an omni-directional antenna might be compared to a thin doughnut or pancake centered around the antenna while the pattern for a sector antenna is fan-shaped, like a wedge cut from a pie. As with all forms of electromagnetic energy, the power density from a cellular or PCS transmitter decreases rapidly (according to an inverse square law) as one moves away from the antenna. Consequently, normal ground-level exposure is much less than exposures that might be encountered if one were very close to the antenna and in its main transmitted beam. Measurements made near typical cellular and PCS installations have shown that ground-level power densities are well below limits recommended by RF/microwave safety standards.

In 1996, the FCC adopted updated guidelines for evaluating human exposure to radiofrequency (RF) fields from fixed transmitting antennas such as those used for cellular radio and PCS base stations<sup>1</sup>. The new guidelines for cellular and PCS base stations are identical to those recommended by the National Council on Radiation Protection and Measurements (NCRP)<sup>2</sup>. These guidelines are also similar to the 1992 guidelines recommended by the American National Standards Institute and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (ANSI/IEEE C95.1-1992)<sup>3</sup>. The FCC adopted guidelines for hand-held RF devices, such as cellular and PCS phones, that are the same as those recommended by the ANSI/IEEE and NCRP guidelines (see later discussion).

In the case of cellular base station transmitters, at a frequency of 869 MHz (the lowest frequency used), the FCC's RF exposure guidelines recommend a maximum permissible exposure level of the general public (or exposure in "uncontrolled" environments) of about 580 microwatts per square centimeter ( $\mu\text{W}/\text{cm}^2$ ), as averaged over any thirty-minute period. This limit is many times greater than RF levels typical found near the base of typical cellular towers or in the vicinity of other, lower-powered cellular base station transmitters. For example, measurement data obtained from various sources have consistently indicated that "worst-case" ground-level power densities near typical cellular towers are on the order of 1  $\mu\text{W}/\text{cm}^2$  or less (usually

significantly less). Calculations corresponding to a "worst-case" situation (all transmitters operating simultaneously and continuously at the maximum licensed power) show that in order to be exposed to levels near the FCC's limits for cellular frequencies, an individual would essentially have to remain in the main transmitting beam (at the height of the antenna) and within a few feet from the antenna. This makes it extremely unlikely that a member of the general public could be exposed to RF levels in excess of these guidelines from cellular base station transmitters.

For PCS base station transmitters, the same type of analysis holds, except that at the PCS transmitting frequencies (1850-1990 MHz) the FCC's exposure limits for the public are 1000  $\mu\text{W}/\text{cm}^2$ . Therefore, there would typically be an even greater margin of safety between actual public exposure levels and the recognized safety limit.

When cellular and PCS antennas are mounted at rooftop locations it is possible that RF levels greater than 1  $\mu\text{W}/\text{cm}^2$  could be present on the rooftop itself. This might become an issue if the rooftop were accessible to maintenance personnel or others. However, exposures approaching or exceeding the safety guidelines are only likely to be encountered very close to and directly in front of the antennas. Even if RF levels were to be higher than desirable on a rooftop, appropriate restrictions could be placed on access. Factoring in the time-averaging aspects of safety standards could also be used to reduce potential exposure. The fact that rooftop cellular and PCS antennas usually operate at lower power levels than antennas on free-standing towers makes excessive exposure conditions on rooftops even less likely. This reason and the significant signal attenuation of a building's roof also minimizes any chance for harmful exposure of persons living or working within the building itself.

## **(2) Mobile (vehicle-mounted) antennas**

Vehicle-mounted antennas used for cellular communications normally operate at a power level of 3 watts or less. These cellular antennas are typically mounted on the roof, on the trunk, or on the rear window of a car or truck. Studies have shown that in order to be exposed to RF levels that approach the safety guidelines it would be necessary to remain very close to a vehicle-mounted cellular antenna. For example, a study done for AT&T Bell Laboratories by the University of Washington documented typical and "worst-case" exposure levels and specific absorption rates (SAR) for vehicle occupants and persons standing close to vehicle-mounted cellular antennas. Worst-case exposure conditions were considered when an individual was at the closest possible distance from the antenna. Several configurations were tested using adult and child "phantom" models.

The results of this study showed that the highest exposure (1900  $\mu\text{W}/\text{cm}^2$ ) occurred with a female model at a distance of 9.7 cm (3.8 inches) from one of the antennas operating at a power level of 3 watts. Although this level is nominally in excess of the FCC's exposure limits for power density at this frequency, analysis of the data indicated that the antenna would have to be driven to 7 W of power before the limit

for specific absorption rate (SAR) allowed by the FCC guidelines would be exceeded. The intermittent nature of transmission and the improbability that a person would remain so close to the antenna for any length of time further reduces the potential for excessive exposure.

The University of Washington study also indicated that vehicle occupants are effectively shielded by the metal body. Motorola, Inc., in comments filed with the FCC, has expressed the opinion that proper installation of a vehicle-mounted antenna to maximize the shielding effect is an effective way of limiting exposure. Motorola and other companies have recommended antenna installation either in the center of the roof or the center of the trunk. In response to concerns expressed over the commonly-used rear-window mounted cellular antennas, Motorola has recommended a minimum separation distance of 30-60 cm (1 -2 feet) to minimize exposure to vehicle occupants resulting from antenna mismatch for this type of antenna installation.

In summary, from data gathered to date, it appears that properly installed, vehicle- mounted, personal wireless transceivers using up to 3 watts of power would result in maximum exposure levels in or near the vehicle that are well below the FCC's safety limits. This assumes that the transmitting antenna is at least 15 cm (about 6 inches) or more from vehicle occupants. Time-averaging of exposure (either a 6 or 30 minute period is specified) will usually result in still lower values when compared with safety guidelines.

### **(3) Hand-held cellular telephones and PCS devices**

A question that often arises is whether there may be potential health risks due to the RF emissions from hand-held cellular telephones and PCS devices. The FCC's exposure guidelines, and the ANSI/IEEE and NCRP guidelines upon which they are based, specify limits for human exposure to RF emissions from hand-held RF devices in terms of specific absorption rate (SAR). For exposure of the general public, e.g., exposure of the user of a cellular or PCS phone, the SAR limit is an absorption threshold of 1.6 watts/kg (W/kg), as measured over any one gram of tissue.

Measurements and computational analysis of SAR in models of the human head and other studies of SAR distribution using hand-held cellular and PCS phones have shown that, in general, the 1.6 W/kg limit is unlikely to be exceeded under normal conditions of use. Before FCC approval can be granted for marketing of a cellular or PCS phone, compliance with the 1.6 W/kg limit must be demonstrated. Also, testing of hand-held phones is normally done under conditions of maximum power usage. In reality, normal power usage is less and is dependent on distance of the user from the base station transmitter.

In recent years publicity, speculation and concern over claims of possible health effects due to RF fields from hand-held wireless telephones prompted industry-sponsored groups, such as Wireless Technology Research, L.L.C. (WTR) and Motorola, Inc., to initiate research programs aimed at investigating whether there is any risk to

users of these devices. Past studies carried out at frequencies both higher and lower than those used for cellular and PCS phones have led expert organizations to conclude that typical RF exposures from these devices are safe. However, the Federal Government is monitoring the results of the ongoing industry-sponsored research through an inter-agency working group led by the EPA and the FDA's Center for Devices and Radiological Health.

In a 1993 "Talk Paper," the FDA stated that it did not have enough information at that time to rule out the possibility of risk, but if such a risk exists "it is probably small." The FDA concluded that there is no proof that cellular telephones can be harmful, but if individuals remain concerned several precautionary actions could be taken. These included limiting conversations on hand-held cellular telephones to those that are essential and making greater use of telephones with vehicle-mounted antennas where there is a greater separation distance between the user and the radiating structure.

\* \* \*

NOTE: For more information on these and other RF-related topics, you may call the FCC's toll-free number: 1-888-CALL FCC (1-888-225-5322) or contact the FCC's RF Safety Program, in the Office of Engineering and Technology, at (202) 418-2464. Information is also available at the FCC's Office of Engineering and Technology World Wide Web Site under the "RF Safety" heading at the following address: <http://www.fcc.gov/oet/rfsafety/>.

#### Endnotes:

1. FCC Report and Order in ET Docket 93-62, 61 Federal Register 41006 (August 7, 1996); 11 FCC Record 15123 (1997). See also, FCC Second Memorandum Opinion and Order, ET Docket 93-62, 62 Federal Register 47960 (September 12, 1997), 12 FCC Record 13494 (1997). For more information on these documents contact the FCC's toll-free number: 1-888-CALL FCC (1-888-225-5322). They may also be viewed and downloaded at the FCC's Office of Engineering and Technology World Wide Web Site under the "RF Safety" heading at the following address: [www.fcc.gov/oet/rfsafety](http://www.fcc.gov/oet/rfsafety). The FCC's RF exposure guidelines are based on recommendations made to the FCC by U.S. federal safety and health agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).
2. The NCRP is a non-profit corporation chartered by congress to develop information and recommendations concerning radiation protection.
3. The American National Standards Institute is a non-profit, privately-funded, membership organization that coordinates development of voluntary national standards in the United States. The IEEE is a non-profit technical and professional engineering society.

*last reviewed/updated 11/4/02*

---

[FCC Home](#) | [Search](#) | [Updates](#) | [E-Filing](#) | [Initiatives](#) | [For Consumers](#) | [Find People](#)

---

If you have questions about this web page, or would like more information pertaining to OET, please send e-mail to [oetinfo@fcc.gov](mailto:oetinfo@fcc.gov)

---

Federal Communications Commission  
445 12th Street SW  
Washington, DC 20554  
[More FCC Contact Information...](#)

Phone: 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322)  
TTY: 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322)  
Fax: 1-866-418-0232  
E-mail: [fccinfo@fcc.gov](mailto:fccinfo@fcc.gov)

- [Web Policies & Privacy Statement](#)
- [Required Browser Plug-ins](#)
- [Customer Service Standards](#)
- [Freedom of Information Act](#)