

Safety fears raised on video phones

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A STUDY has raised concerns about the safety of antennas for new generation high-speed video telephones after finding they can cause headaches and nausea. About 50,000 Australians now have a video telephone following their launch by telecommunications company Hutchison Orange in April. Hutchison has about 1600 antennas, or base stations, in Australia, all in the city areas of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and the Gold Coast.

A study conducted by the Dutch Government and technological research institute TNO compared radiation from base stations for the current mobile telephone network with base stations for 3G networks. "If the test group was exposed to third-generation base station signals there was a significant impact," the Dutch economics ministry said. "They felt tingling sensations, got headaches and felt nauseous." Dr Colin Roy, director of the non-ionising radiation branch of the Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency, said the study was credible but needed to be replicated. He said radiation from transmitters was generally low-level and well within Australian safety standards. Mobile telephone exposure, while not the subject of the study, was much higher. "Phones actually do give the same sort of radiation but at a much higher level and much closer to the standard," he said. "Because of the nature of the networks the emissions from the (3G) towers are even lower than the current digital ones. "But what we're talking about here specifically is the tower, and of course that exposure occurs whether you have a mobile phone or not."

Australia's mobile phone industry said there was no substantive evidence that mobile telephones caused headaches. Executive director of the Mobile Carriers Forum, Tanya Stoianoff, also noted advice from the World Health Organisation which said no recent reviews had concluded that exposure to radio frequency fields from mobile telephones and their bases stations caused adverse health consequences. "The . . . scientific process of replication and validation (is) required before the results (of this study) can be accurately assessed within the whole body of scientific evidence," Ms Stoianoff said.

A spokeswoman for Hutchison said the company did not wish to comment, preferring an industry-led response. The head of the Australian Centre for Radio Frequency Bioeffects Research, Professor Irena Cosic, said Australia was lacking research into video telephones because they were so new. However, she said they operated on a higher frequency than traditional mobiles, which should theoretically make it more difficult for radiation to penetrate the brain and body. The centre intended to follow up the Dutch research, she said.

The country's third-biggest mobile phone carrier, Vodafone, plans to launch its 3G services by mid-2005.