

Three years to see if mobiles hurt kids

By DANIELLE TEUTSCH

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A WORLD-FIRST study will begin in Australia this week to find out if mobile phones are damaging the health of children.

The study of 12- and 13-year-olds will measure if mobile-phone use affects factors such as hearing, memory, sleep and ability to concentrate.

It follows recommendations by the World Health Organisation that more research be urgently done on whether children's central nervous systems are more vulnerable than adults' to the effects of electromagnetic radiation.

Australian children have one of the highest rates of mobile-phone ownership in the world almost half of those aged 13 to 15 and a third of those aged 10 to 13 own one.

The National Health and Medical Research Centre study, which will follow 300 Melbourne children over three years, is being conducted by the **Australian Centre for Radiofrequency Bioeffects Research**.

The children will have their cognitive functions, hearing and blood pressure tested at regular intervals, **ACRBR** executive director Dr Rodney Croft said. "These are areas that are likely to be affected, if there are any effects," he said.

Several studies have shown EMR exposure causes no harm to the physical development of children over age two or a higher likelihood of cancer.

Dr Croft said the research was a response to community concerns about children and mobile phones.

"What we are working on is the precautionary principle," he said.

WHO radiation program coordinator Dr Mike Repacholi, who was in Australia last week as part of a workshop on EMR and health effects at Melbourne's Swinburne University, said filling the gaps in research was a high priority because of the increasing number of children using mobile phones.

"Children as young as five are using mobile phones," Dr Repacholi said. "Yet international standards on exposure [to EMR] are the same for children and adults."

He said children absorbed more radiation because of their smaller heads and thinner skulls. This could possibly cause behaviour, learning and concentration problems.

"So the net result is that children do receive higher exposures," he said. "We could see some subtle effects on the central nervous system."

In January, the British Government's chief adviser on mobile phones, Sir William Stewart, said children aged three to eight should not use mobiles and older children should strictly limit their use until more research had been done.

Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association spokesman Randal Markey said new research was welcome but more than 400 studies on mobile phones had already shown no health consequences, either for adults or children.

Mr Markey said advice from the WHO, the Health Council of the Netherlands and the US Food and Drug Administration was that limiting the use of mobile phones by children was unnecessary.

"The present information does not support that mobile phones for children should be limited," he said.

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