

GAO Report Recommends FCC Review of SAR Limits

Andrew Berg

The United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) Tuesday released a study recommending that the FCC review limits placed on specific absorption rate (SAR), the amount of radio frequency absorbed by the body when using a cell phone.

Today's SAR limits were set back in 1996. The GAO is recommending that the FCC review limits adopted in recent years by European countries, while also taking into consideration changes in technology and usage patterns.

The current SAR limits set by the FCC has a maximum level of radiation emission at 1.6 watts per kilogram. European SAR allows 2 watts per kilogram averaged over 10 grams of tissue, which originates from a recommendation by the IEEE.

According to the report, which was a year in the making, scientific research to date has not demonstrated adverse human health effects of exposure to radio-frequency (RF) energy from mobile phone use.

While the GAO concedes that research is ongoing, it also notes that officials from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the National Institutes of Health, as well as other experts interviewed by GAO have reached similar conclusions about the lack of adverse health effect of RF energy from cell phones.

Specifically, the GAO is recommending that the FCC formally reassess and, if appropriate, change its current RF energy exposure limit and mobile phone testing requirements because cell phones and the way consumers use them are very different than when the current SAR limits were adopted 16 years ago.

The report notes that smartphones today are constantly connecting for updates and notifications even when the phone is not actively being used by the consumer.

The GAO reviewed cell phone manuals, nearly all of which included a statement that when mobile phones are used on the body, as opposed to against the ear, a minimum distance should be maintained between the body and the device. These distances ranged from 1.5 to 2.5 centimeters.

"Since all mobile phones are tested for RF energy exposure compliance at a distance from the body, as discussed previously in this report, these instructions are consistent with how the devices were tested and certified by FCC," the report states. However it also notes that consumers could be unaware of these instructions if they do not read the entire user manual.

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The FCC has noted that a draft document currently under consideration has the potential to address GAO's recommendations.

In response to the GAO report, the CTIA deferred to the views of "scientific experts, federal agencies with expertise and impartial health organizations."

John Walls, vice president of public affairs for CTIA, wrote in a statement yesterday that the FCC, the FDA, the National Cancer Institute and the World Health Organization have each evaluated the scientific research on wireless phones that has been conducted worldwide for more than two decades.

He also noted that the FCC's own website states that "currently no scientific evidence establishes a causal link between wireless device use and cancer or other illnesses," and that "all wireless phones sold in the United States meet government requirements that limit their RF energy to safe levels."

"The FCC has been vigilant in its oversight in this area and has set safety standards to make sure that radio frequency fields from wireless phones remain at what it has determined are safe levels," Walls wrote. "The FCC's safety standards include a 50-fold safety factor and, as the FCC has noted, are the most conservative in the world."

In 2010, CTIA abandoned holding its conferences in San Francisco and has since sued the city for passing a law that requires cell phone packaging to display SAR limits. A judgment in that case is expected later this week.

When reached for comment, AT&T and Verizon Wireless deferred to CTIA's statement on the matter.

But San Francisco is small fry after Ohio Democrat Dennis Kucinich on Tuesday introduced in Congress the Cell Phone Right to Know Act (H.R. 6358), a federal bill that would make SAR warning labels mandatory on cell phones sold nationwide.

Kucinich argues that the current SAR does not take into account vulnerable populations like kids or pregnant women and that it also assumes a person's only exposure is from the phone in use, but with Wi-Fi, smartphones and Bluetooth technologies, exposure to only one wireless device is increasingly rare, especially in urban environments.

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