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18 JUL, 2012, 11.15AM IST, DURGESH NANDAN JHA,TNN

Mobile Towers: Government decides to cut radiation limits to a tenth from September 1

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If you are worried by the [radiation](#) emitted by cellphone towers around you, there is some good news. From September 1 this year, India will lower the level to one tenth of the prevailing standard - from 9.2 w/m2 (watt per square metre) to 0.92 w/m2.

The decision follows a report of the inter-ministerial committee formed by the ministry of communications and information technology to study the hazards posed by EMF ([electromagnetic field](#)) radiation from base stations and mobile phones.

Dr R S Sharma, deputy director general of [Indian Council of Medical Research](#) (ICMR), who represented the health ministry on the committee, said the new norms will place India among the more radiation conscious countries.

"India's current radiation exposure limit (9.2 watt/m2) for [mobile towers](#) is higher than countries like Russia (0.2 w/m2) and China (0.4 w/m2). In [USA](#), Canada and Japan, however, the radiation exposure limit is much higher (12 w/m2)," he said.

Sharma said lowering of the limit is a preventive step against serious health risks posed by radiation emitted from towers which includes the possibility of developing certain types of cancer. The cause and effect relationship though hasn't been established yet.

The department of telecommunications has also issued directions for reducing the specific absorption rate (SAR), a measure of the amount of radiofrequency energy absorbed by the body while using a phone. In May last year, WHO classified radiofrequency EMF associated with a wireless phone as 'possibly carcinogenic to humans'.

The UN's health body urged phone owners to restrict their use and take pragmatic steps to reduce exposure like use of hands-free devices and texting.

The telecom operators are, however, resisting the move. According to Rajan S Mathews, director general of [Cellular Operators Association of India](#) (COAI), lowering of EMF limits will give no health benefits but affect services.

"Deteriorated coverage will mean the handset will have to work harder/at a higher power which will cause greater personal exposure. Also, if the handset operates at a higher power, the battery will discharge faster, giving consumers lesser talktime/standby time, leading to a degraded customer experience," said Mathews. He said more towers would then be needed to plug the gaps, which will increase the overall EMF. He said the rollout of 3G and broadband services will also get adversely affected.

Telecom companies argue that the steps are not needed as there is no proof of a direct correlation between the radiation emitted by cellphone towers and phones and health.

Delhi health minister A K Walia recently held a meeting with scientists from ICMR and JNU, besides others, where it was decided to impose stringent norms for installation of cellphone towers in residential areas. "We are also talking to the union government to make radiation level tags mandatory for different brand of handsets," Walia told TOI.

Girish Kumar, professor in the department of electrical engineering at IIT Bombay, whose research on hazards of cellphone is being used as a reference for most policy decisions in India, said that most countries like Australia, Russia and China have lower levels of EMF radiation exposure compared to India.

"In the US, though the radiation exposure from cellphone towers is higher, they ensure that the site of installation is also higher," said Kumar.

He said it was important to educate people about the duration of mobile usage. "There are more than 900 million mobile subscribers in India. And many youngsters and professionals are using them more than ever - up to two hours daily. Cellphones should not be used for more than 30 minutes in a day," he said.

Flip side: The industry argues that lowering radiation intensity will hit service quality, and require many more towers

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