



Allaying health concerns regarding 5G and exposure to radio waves

An IET guide for policy makers
and local planning authorities
2nd edition

theiet.org/5G-health

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Please note that the views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the IET. It is not intended to be a guidance note with a specified set of recommendations or actions but rather seeks to add understanding and debate around the topic.



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■ About this guide

This Institution of Engineering and Technology Guide aims to give policy makers and Local Planning Authorities a better understanding of what 5G is, and what it is not, as it affects the concerns that have been expressed about exposure to radio waves.

The document is intended as a brief overview and references for further reading are provided in the footnotes.

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The IET Digital Panel would welcome any comments you may have on the contents/ your ideas for future digital publications. Please get in touch via sep@theiet.org.

■ Foreword



There has been an "infodemic" of misleading and false information circulating in the media about 5G and alleged health effects. Some of it is pure fantasy, but there have also been sincere concerns expressed by some people, including scientists, who are not up to date with how 5G has evolved in the UK.

The second edition of the IET Guide "Allaying health concerns regarding 5G and exposure to radio waves" provides a bridge to understanding how the 5G technology being implemented and the frequencies being used affect radio wave exposure, compared to the earlier mobile technologies that everyone is very familiar with.

The Guide is also helpful in another respect. It brings together, in one publication, an explanation of the overall rigorous radio exposure safety framework for public mobile services, embracing both the mobile networks and smartphones. The conclusion that 5G is as safe as 4G, 3G and Global System for Mobile communication (GSM) is not a political soundbite, but a conclusion drawn from an objective detailed examination, by independent professional engineers, who belong to institutions committed to the very highest professional standards.



Professor Danielle George
IET Deputy President

Introduction



What is 5G?

5G is the next evolution in mobile technology that will provide the underlying wireless infrastructure to cope with the relentless rise in data consumption¹ and support many new applications. This includes everything from connected cars and virtual and augmented reality through to the foundations for emerging smart city and Internet of Things (IoT) technologies. It delivers this through the use of revolutionary new hardware like beam forming antennas and innovative new radio coding software at its core.

Features of 5G



Faster download speeds

It is expected that 5G will provide Gb/s data speeds. This would mean things that currently take minutes to download would only take seconds. Even more important will be the ability to support higher download speeds for many more concurrent users in the same place. This will lead to a more predictable and consistent performance.



Lower latency

5G can support significantly lower latency, where appropriate, meaning very little lag, or buffering. This could enable mobile applications that simply aren't possible today, such as multiplayer gaming, factory automation and other tasks that demand quick responses.



Greater capacity

5G will also have vastly greater capacity, allowing networks to better cope with not only the rapidly increasing data demands of customers today, but also the growth of high-demand applications being planned in the future.

¹ Ofcom "Enabling 5G in the UK" https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0022/111883/enabling-5g-uk.pdf.

Key observations

	
	The 5G technology itself, <i>in so far as it affects radio wave exposure</i> , is very similar to 4G and in terms of its pulsed signals, the same as Global System for Mobile communication (GSM), Digital Enhanced Cordless Telecommunications (DECT) phones and a version of 4G.
	As there has been no dispensation for 5G safety standards, it will have to meet the same safety standards as 4G, 3G and GSM, meaning 5G will be just as safe as 4G, 3G and GSM.
	There are no "higher frequency" (mmWaves) commercial 5G mobile antennas deployed anywhere in the UK and none are currently planned (due to high cost of coverage).
	Reducing exposure to radio waves in the future requires more base stations in order to drive down both smartphone and base station power levels.

Electromagnetic Field (EMF) exposure guidelines developed by the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection (ICNIRP)

The first element of the cellular mobile radio wave exposure safety framework are the international recommended guidelines set by the ICNIRP at levels to ensure no harm².



The most recent set of ICNIRP guidelines were published on the 11th March 2020, following a comprehensive assessment of peer-reviewed scientific literature over two decades, covering both thermal and non-thermal effects. The guidelines are designed to ensure that all people are not exposed to electromagnetic radiation at radio frequencies³ in a way that would have any adverse effect on the body, such as excessive heating. No evidence for cancer, infertility or other health effects⁴ has been found at the exposure levels recommended in the guidelines.

The reference exposure level for bands below 6 GHz (i.e. all the frequencies currently used in the UK for GSM, 3G, 4G & 5G) has not been changed in the revised guidelines. They have been calculated by reference to specific absorption rate (SAR)⁵ and incorporate a substantial margin of safety.

For bands above 6 GHz, where the body does not really absorb the Radio Frequency (RF), the guidelines are set by reference to Power Density (PD)⁶, and again incorporating a substantial margin of safety.

² <https://www.icnirp.org/en/frequencies/radiofrequency/index.html>.

<https://www.icnirp.org/cms/upload/publications/ICNIRPrfgdl2020.pdf>.

³ The radiofrequency ranges are in the non-ionising part of the Electromagnetic Spectrum (30Hz to 300GHz), well below, for example, the visible light portion of the Electromagnetic Spectrum (c.430-740THz).

⁴ Other health effects mentioned include absurd theories linking 5G to Coronavirus.

⁵ SAR is defined as the power absorbed per mass of tissue and has units of watts per kilogram (W/kg). SAR is usually averaged either over the whole body or over a small sample volume (typically 1g or 10g of tissue).

⁶ Power density is the amount of power per unit area (Watts/M²).

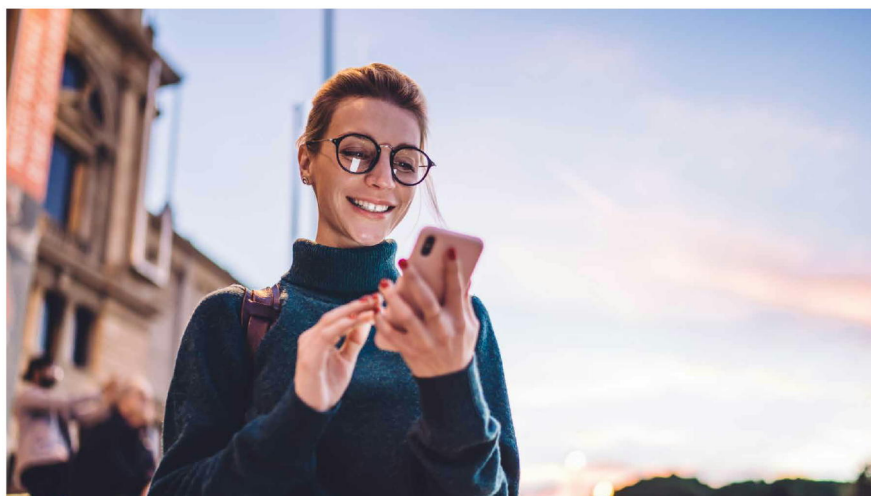
Compliance with ICNIRP guidelines for 5G mobile broadband networks

The second element of the cellular mobile radio wave exposure safety framework is *compliance* of base stations with ICNIRP recommended limits.

Ofcom intends to introduce a new condition in spectrum licences that will require licensees to ensure that all Electric and Magnetic Fields (EMF) emissions from radio equipment in excess of 10 watts (effective isotropic radiated power) complies with the relevant levels for general public exposure from the ICNIRP Guidelines. It will ensure Ofcom is in a position to take appropriate enforcement action in the event of non-compliance with the ICNIRP Guidelines.

Ofcom has already carried out their own independent measurements on some deployed 5G base stations and verified their compliance with the guidelines⁷.

As part of the process for obtaining planning consent for new 4G/5G sites and upgrades, each operator will continue to confirm compliance with ICNIRP guidelines⁸.



⁷ See <https://www.comsoc.org/publications/ctn/truth-out-there-examining-science-around-5g-paranoia>.

⁸ See <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/manage-your-licence/radiocommunication-licences/mobile-wirelessbroadband/exposure-electro-magnetic-fields>.

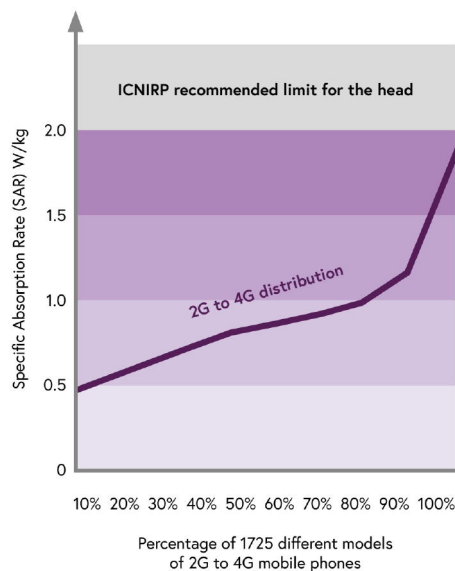
Compliance with ICNIRP guidelines for 5G smartphones and consumer choice

The third element of the cellular mobile radio wave exposure safety framework are the recommended limits for smartphones and other mobile devices.

A manufacturer, by adding a CE marking, is declaring, on its own responsibility, conformity with all of the legal requirements to achieve CE marking, including compliance with ICNIRP guidelines.

The illustration below indicates the distribution of Specific Absorption Rate (SAR) values for the head with GSM, 3G and 4G mobile technology generations based upon a very large sample of 1725 different models from 14 different manufacturers over a number of years.

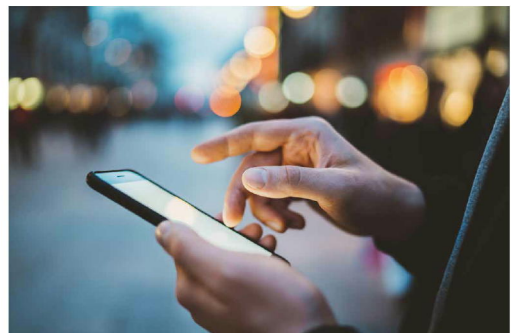
Specific Absorption Rate (SAR) values for the head with GSM, 3G and 4G mobile technology



The result shows almost 80% of all models in this very large sample had SAR values under 50% of the recommended limit. Data has been gathered on a number of 5G smartphones on sale in the UK. All the values were compliant and comparable to the earlier generations of smartphones. The frequencies built into the UK 5G smartphones were all below 6 GHz.

In recent years, SAR information for some phones has not always been easy for consumers to locate. SAR information should be included in publicly available technical specifications of all smartphones in order to facilitate consumer choice.

Finally, "handsfree working" is now standard on all smartphones. This offers consumers the discretion for further reducing RF exposure.



Exposure level reductions from new masts and small cells

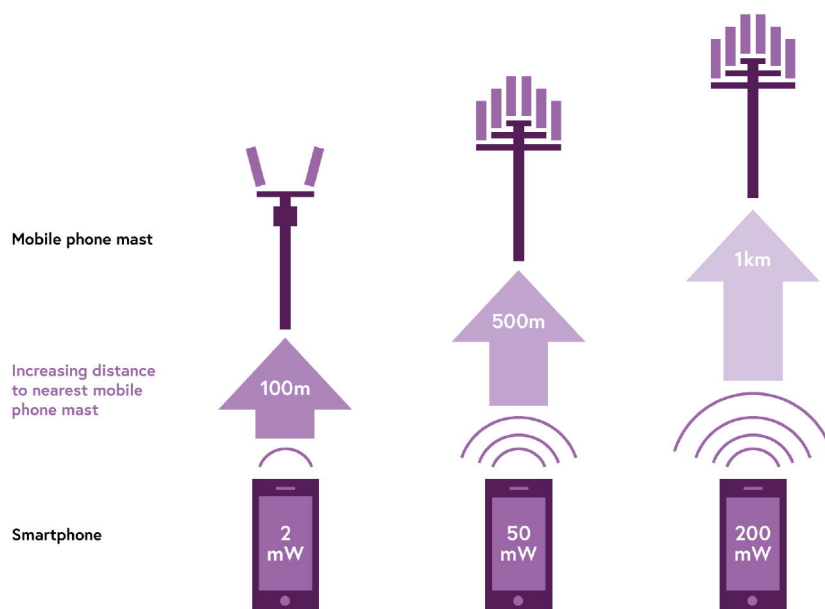
Small cells (micro-cells or pico-cells) are physically smaller antenna systems designed to work over a very short range to ease network congestion or fill in gaps in coverage.

Some people have expressed concern that a large number of 5G cells may increase a person's exposure to radio waves. However, that is not the way cellular mobile networks work. Every time a new mast or small cell is added, the distance the signal has to travel reduces. Therefore, from the laws of physics, the power needed at the smartphone and base station for a reliable connection is much less. Using the lowest practical power level is essential to prevent users located in different cells from disrupting each other's connections. It also saves the user's smartphone battery life.

For many people, their smartphone will be by far the nearest source of radio wave energy to them. As a result, more masts or 5G small cells will lead to a reduction in the overall radio wave signal strength an individual smartphone user is exposed to.

At the moment, there are relatively few small cells in use in the UK and though their numbers are likely to increase over time, we don't expect a mass rollout of them any time soon.

Illustrating how more base stations reduce smartphone powers and hence RF exposure⁹



⁹ The numbers are purely illustrative and the actual powers will be determined by many factors including, importantly, the physical distance but also the urban topology between the network antenna and the smartphone.

— The most widely used 5G band in the UK will be 3.6GHz

The UK and Europe proposed the use of three bands for 5G¹⁰. These were termed the 5G pioneer bands and each had a different purpose.



700MHz

This band is to secure pervasive national coverage. It's likely to be deployed from the traditional tall mobile phone masts. Only modest data capacity can be supported.



3.6GHz (3.4-3.8GHz)

The 3.6GHz band sits between the current WiFi bands at 2.4GHz and 5GHz that are already widely deployed in homes, offices and public places. 3.6GHz is the 'sweet spot' for achieving the best capacity over the largest areas for the lowest cost and has wide international support. The mass deployment of small low power base stations in towns and cities will most likely use this band¹¹.



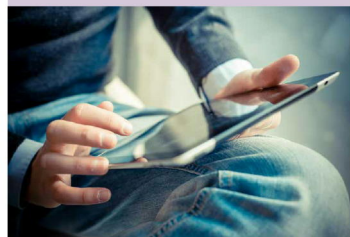
26GHz

This high frequency (mmWaves) supports the largest capacity but at the highest cost of coverage. There are no 26 GHz (mmWaves) commercial 5G mobile antenna being deployed anywhere in the UK and none are currently planned.

Research engineers see a potential for 26GHz to be used for a data capacity lift in the limited number of locations where the 3.6 GHz frequency maxes out over the next 10 years (less than 3% of the UK¹³). Another use may be as a low power advanced manufacturing broadband access point (industry 4.0). Such examples of relatively short distance applications only need relatively low power levels.

Beam forming antennas

For the past 20 years mobile operators have typically used three or four sectorized antennas, so as not to waste radio energy in directions where it's not needed. New beam forming antennas (sometimes referred to as Massive (complexity) Multiple input Multiple output antenna) make the transmission much more efficient, with the equivalent of 40, much smaller sectors, but still able to deliver the same power to a user standing at the edge of the cell's coverage area but wasting less energy to achieve this¹².



¹⁰ European Commission Radio Spectrum Policy Group's "Strategic Roadmap towards 5G in Europe" https://rspg-spectrum.eu/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/RPSG16-032-Opinion_5G.pdf

and IET "5G Networks for Policy Makers" report <https://www.theiet.org/media/1166/5g-report.pdf>.

¹¹ Ofcom "Enabling 5G in the UK" March 2018 paragraph 1.13 https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0022/111883/enabling-5g-uk.pdf.

¹² IEEE Spectrum "5G Bytes: Massive MIMO Explained" <https://spectrum.ieee.org/video/telecom/wireless/5gbytes-massive-mimo-explained>.

¹³ techUK "UK SPF publish principles for the release of 26 GHz 5G pioneer band" <https://www.techuk.org/insights/reports/item/15915-uk-spf-publish-principles-for-the-release-of-26-ghz-5g-pioneer-band>.

Conclusion



5G is just as safe as 4G, 3G and GSM

This document has aimed to set out the reality around concerns regarding radio wave exposure, mobile coverage and 5G.

Small 5G base stations in our towns and cities will allow improved network coverage. They will reduce radio wave exposure to individual smartphone users and improve local 5G capacity for all manner of useful bandwidth-hungry applications. A good 5G fibre base local broadband infrastructure will be important to local communities over the coming decades in view of the ever-increasing amounts of data being consumed by the general public.



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