

Radiation from cellphone handsets is “possibly carcinogenic to humans” and may cause glioma, a type of brain cancer, says the World Health Organisation’s International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). IARC put radio-frequency electromagnetic fields — emitted from cellphones, radars, microwaves and radio, TV and wireless signals — in the same cancer risk category as lead, DDT, chloroform and coffee.

This is the third-highest IARC rating, below “carcinogenic to humans”, which includes tobacco, and “probably carcinogenic”, which includes diesel exhaust and anabolic steroids.

With five billion mobile subscriptions in the world and growing, WHO warns against long and frequent use of cellphones. “Additional research is needed. Till then, it is important to take pragmatic measures to reduce exposure by using hands-free devices or texting,” said IARC director Christopher Wild.

Over the past week, 31 scientists from 14 countries reviewed several existing studies, including IARC’s Interphone study that said more than half an hour a day over 10 years increases risk of gliomas by 40%. They concluded that the evidence linking cellphone use to brain cancer was limited, inconclusive. Simply put, the cancers could have occurred by chance rather than causation and more studies were needed.

“Cellphone use has become widely popular only over the past decade but it’s too early to rule out the risk... Children, adolescents and pregnant women should use mobiles when strictly necessary as they are at greater risk of absorbing radiation,” said Dr GK Rath, head of the Rotary Cancer Institute at AIIMS.

IARC CANCER RISK LIST

Group 2B lists 266 substances that are possibly carcinogenic to human beings. They include the following

- Cellphone radiation
- Coffee
- DDT
- Lead
- Petrol exhaust
- Occupational exposure as drycleaner or firefighter

The graphic includes an illustration of a human head profile with a brain, overlaid with a mobile phone, symbolizing radiation exposure.