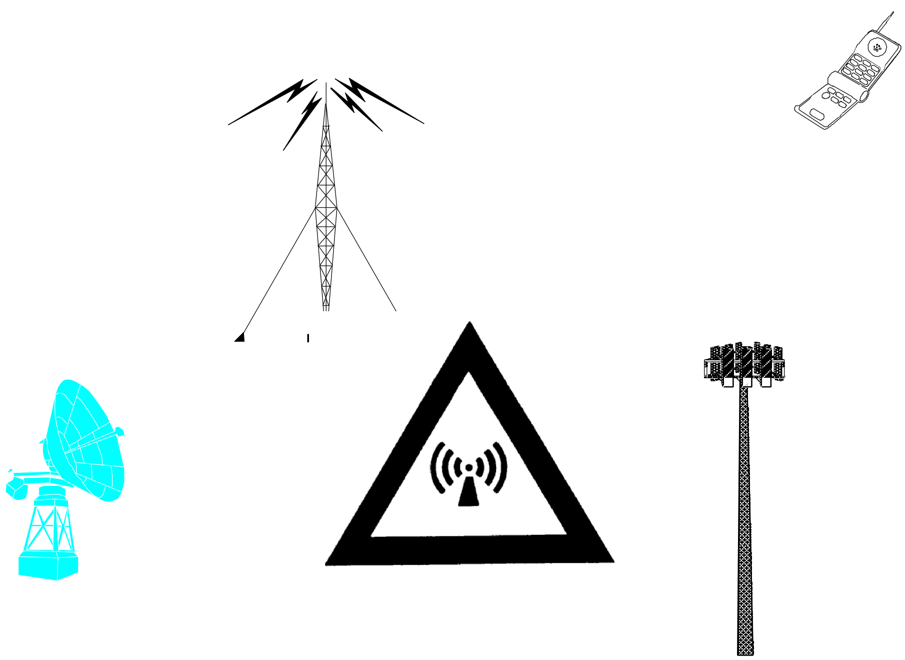
Federal Communications Commission
Office of Engineering & Technology

Questions and Answers about Biological Effects and Potential Hazards of Radiofrequency Electromagnetic Fields



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INTRODUCTION

Many consumer and industrial products and applications make use of some form of electromagnetic energy. One type of electromagnetic energy that is of increasing importance worldwide is radiofrequency (or "RF") energy, including radio waves and microwaves, which is used for providing telecommunications, broadcast and other services. In the United States the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) authorizes or licenses most RF telecommunications services, facilities, and devices used by the public, industry and state and local governmental organizations. Because of its regulatory responsibilities in this area the FCC often receives inquiries concerning whether there are potential safety hazards due to human exposure to RF energy emitted by FCC-regulated transmitters. Heightened awareness of the expanding use of RF technology has led some people to speculate that "electromagnetic pollution" is causing significant risks to human health from environmental RF electromagnetic fields. This document is designed to provide factual information and to answer some of the most commonly asked questions related to this topic.[1]

WHAT IS RADIOFREQUENCY ENERGY?

Radio waves and microwaves are forms of electromagnetic energy that are collectively described by the term "radiofrequency" or "RF." RF emissions and associated phenomena can be discussed in terms of "energy," "radiation" or "fields." Radiation is defined as the propagation of energy through space in the form of waves or particles. Electromagnetic "radiation" can best be described as waves of electric and magnetic energy moving together (i.e., radiating) through space as illustrated in **Figure 1.** These waves are generated by the movement of electrical charges such as in a conductive metal object or antenna. For example, the alternating movement of charge (i.e., the "current") in an antenna used by a radio or television broadcast station or in a cellular base station antenna generates electromagnetic waves that radiate away from the "transmit" antenna and are then intercepted by a "receive" antenna such as a rooftop TV antenna, car radio antenna or an antenna integrated into a hand-held device such as a cellular telephone. The term "electromagnetic field" is used to indicate the presence of electromagnetic energy at a given location. The RF field can be described in terms of the electric and/or magnetic field strength at that location.[2]

Like any wave-related phenomenon, electromagnetic energy can be characterized by a wavelength and a frequency. The wavelength (λ) is the distance covered by one complete

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[1] Exposure to low-frequency electromagnetic fields generated by electric power transmission has also been the subject of public concern. However, because the FCC does not have regulatory authority with respect to power-line electromagnetic fields, this document only addresses questions related to **RF** exposure. Information about exposure due to electrical power transmission can be obtained from several sources, including the following Internet World Wide Web site: **http://www.niehs.nih.gov/emfrapid**

[2] The term "EMF" is often used to refer to electromagnetic fields, in general. It can be used to refer to either power-line frequency fields, radiofrequency electromagnetic fields or both.

electromagnetic wave cycle, as shown in **Figure 1**. The frequency is the number of electromagnetic waves passing a given point in one second. For example, a typical radio wave transmitted by an FM radio station has a wavelength of about three (3) meters and a frequency of about 100 million cycles (waves) per second or "100 MHz." One "hertz" (abbreviated "Hz") equals one cycle per second. Therefore, in this case, about 100 million RF electromagnetic waves would be transmitted to a given point every second.

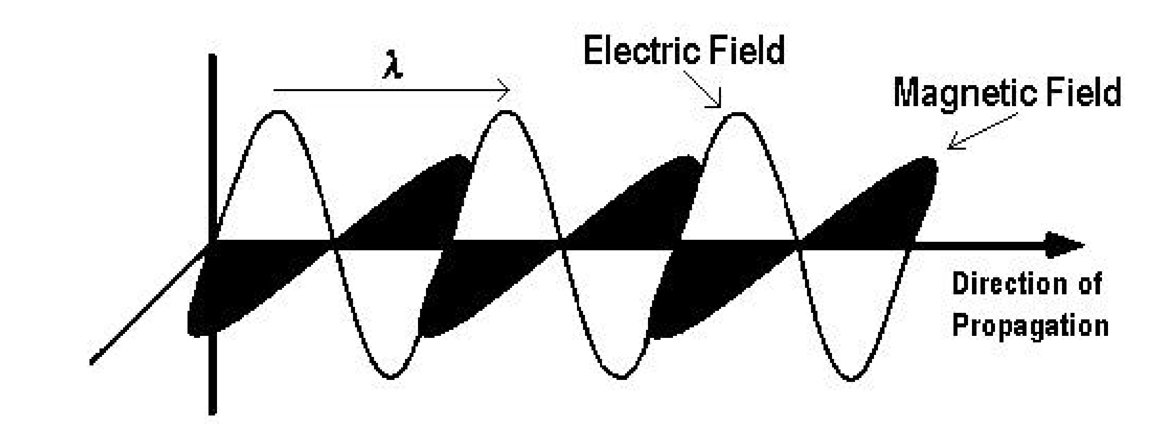

FIGURE 1. ***Electromagnetic Wave***

Electromagnetic waves travel through space at the speed of light, and the wavelength and frequency of an electromagnetic wave are inversely related by a simple mathematical formula: frequency (***f***) times wavelength (λ) = the speed of light (***c***), or $f \times \lambda = c$. This simple equation can also be expressed as follows in terms of either frequency or wavelength:

$$f = \frac{c}{8} \quad or \quad 8 = \frac{c}{f}$$

Since the speed of light in a given medium or vacuum does not change, high-frequency electromagnetic waves have short wavelengths and low-frequency waves have long wavelengths. The electromagnetic "spectrum" (**Figure 2**) includes all the various forms of electromagnetic energy from extremely low frequency (ELF) energy, with very long wavelengths, to X-rays and gamma rays, which have very high frequencies and correspondingly short wavelengths. In between these extremes are radio waves, microwaves, infrared radiation, visible light, and ultraviolet radiation, in that order. The RF part of the electromagnetic spectrum is generally defined as that part of the spectrum where electromagnetic waves have frequencies in the range of about 3 kilohertz to 300 gigahertz. One kilohertz (kHz) equals one thousand hertz, one megahertz (MHz) equals one million hertz, and one gigahertz (GHz) equals one billion hertz. Thus, when you tune your FM radio to 101.5, it means that your radio is receiving signals from a radio station emitting radio waves at a frequency of 101.5 million cycles (waves) per second, or 101.5 MHz.

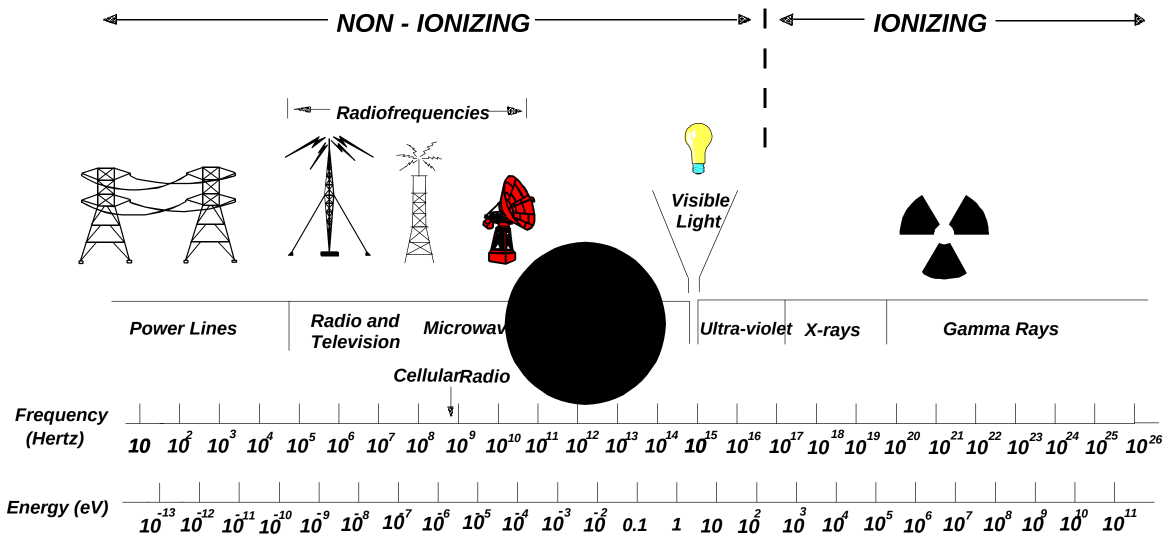

FIGURE 2. ***The Electromagnetic Spectrum***

HOW DO WE USE RADIOFREQUENCY ENERGY?

Probably the most important use for RF energy is in providing telecommunications services to the public, industry and government. Radio and television broadcasting, cellular telephones, personal communications services (PCS), pagers, cordless telephones, business radio, radio communications for police and fire departments, amateur radio, microwave point-to-point radio links and satellite communications are just a few of the many applications of RF energy for telecommunications.

Microwave ovens and radar are examples of non-communications uses of RF energy. Also important are uses of RF energy in industrial heating and sealing where electronic devices generate RF radiation that rapidly heats the material being processed in the same way that a microwave oven cooks food. RF heaters and sealers have many uses in industry, including molding plastic materials, gluing wood products, sealing items such as shoes and pocketbooks, and processing food products.

There are a number of medical applications of RF energy, including a technique called *diathermy*, that take advantage of the ability of RF energy to rapidly heat tissue below the body's surface. Tissue heating ("hyperthermia") can be beneficial in the therapeutic treatment of injured tissue and cancerous tumors (*see* References 17 & 18).

WHAT ARE MICROWAVES?

Microwaves are a specific category of radio waves that can be defined as radiofrequency radiation where frequencies range upward from several hundred megahertz (MHz) to several gigahertz (GHz). One of the most familiar and widespread uses of microwave energy is found in household microwave ovens, which operate at a frequency of 2450 MHz (2.45 GHz).

Microwaves are also widely used for telecommunications purposes such as for cellular radio, personal communications services (PCS), microwave point-to-point communication, transmission links between ground stations and orbiting satellites, and in certain broadcasting operations such as studio-to-transmitter (STL) and electronic news gathering (ENG) radio links. Microwave radar systems provide information on air traffic and weather and are extensively used in military and police applications. In the medical field microwave devices are used for a variety of therapeutic purposes including the selective heating of tumors as an adjunct to chemotherapy treatment (microwave hyperthermia).

Radiofrequency radiation, especially at microwave frequencies, efficiently transfers energy to water molecules. At high microwave intensities the resulting energetic water molecules can generate heat in water-rich materials such as most foods. The operation of microwave ovens is based on this principle. This efficient absorption of microwave energy via water molecules results in rapid heating throughout an object, thus allowing food to be cooked more quickly than in a conventional oven.

WHAT IS NON-IONIZING RADIATION?

As explained earlier, electromagnetic radiation is defined as the propagation of energy through space in the form of waves or particles. Some electromagnetic phenomena can be most easily described if the energy is considered as waves, while other phenomena are more readily explained by considering the energy as a flow of particles or "photons." This is known as the "wave-particle" duality of electromagnetic energy. The energy associated with a photon, the elemental unit of an electromagnetic wave, depends on its frequency (or wavelength). The higher the frequency of an electromagnetic wave (and the shorter its corresponding wavelength), the greater will be the energy of a photon associated with it. The energy content of a photon is often expressed in terms of the unit "electron-volt" or "eV".

Photons associated with X-rays and gamma rays (which have very high electromagnetic frequencies) have a relatively large energy content. At the other end of the electromagnetic spectrum, photons associated with low-frequency waves (such as those at ELF frequencies) have many times less energy. In between these extremes ultraviolet radiation, visible light, infrared radiation, and RF energy (including microwaves) exhibit intermediate photon energy content. For comparison, the photon energies associated with high-energy X-rays are billions of times ***more*** energetic than the energy of a 1-GHz microwave photon. The photon energies associated with the various frequencies of the electromagnetic spectrum are shown in the lower scale of **Figure 2**.

Ionization is a process by which electrons are stripped from atoms and molecules. This process can produce molecular changes that can lead to damage in biological tissue, including effects on DNA, the genetic material. This process requires interaction with photons containing high energy levels, such as those of X-rays and gamma rays. A single quantum event (absorption of an X-ray or gamma-ray photon) can cause ionization and subsequent biological damage due to the high energy content of the photon, which would be in excess of 10 eV (considered to be the minimum photon energy capable of causing ionization). Therefore, X-rays and gamma rays are examples of ***ionizing*** radiation. Ionizing radiation is also associated with the generation of nuclear energy, where it is often simply referred to as "radiation."

The photon energies of RF electromagnetic waves are not great enough to cause the ionization of atoms and molecules and RF energy is, therefore, characterized as ***non-ionizing*** radiation, along with visible light, infrared radiation and other forms of electromagnetic radiation with relatively low frequencies. It is important that the terms "ionizing" and "non-ionizing" not be confused when discussing biological effects of electromagnetic radiation or energy, since the mechanisms of interaction with the human body are quite different.

HOW ARE RADIOFREQUENCY FIELDS MEASURED?

Because an RF electromagnetic field has both an electric and a magnetic component (electric field and magnetic field), it is often convenient to express the intensity of the RF field in terms of units specific for each component. The unit "volts per meter" (V/m) is often used to measure the strength ("field strength") of the electric field, and the unit "amperes per meter" (A/m) is often used to express the strength of the magnetic field.

Another commonly used unit for characterizing an RF electromagnetic field is "power density." Power density is most accurately used when the point of measurement is far enough away from the RF emitter to be located in what is commonly referred to as the "far-field" zone of the radiation source, e.g., more than several wavelengths distance from a typical RF source.

In the far field, the electric and magnetic fields are related to each other in a known way, and it is only necessary to measure one of these quantities in order to determine the other quantity or the power density. In closer proximity to an antenna, i.e., in the "near-field" zone, the physical relationships between the electric and magnetic components of the field are usually complex. In this case, it is necessary to determine both the electric and magnetic field strengths to fully characterize the RF environment. (Note: In some cases equipment used for making field measurements displays results in terms of "far-field equivalent" power density, even though the measurement is being taken in the near field.) At frequencies above about 300 MHz it is usually sufficient to measure only the electric field to characterize the RF environment if the measurement is not made too close to the RF emitter.

Power density is defined as power per unit area. For example, power density can be expressed in terms of milliwatts per square centimeter (mW/cm^2) or microwatts per square centimeter ($\mu W/cm^2$). One mW equals 0.001 watt of power, and one µW equals 0.000001 watt. With respect to frequencies in the microwave range and higher, power density is usually used to express intensity since exposures that might occur would likely be in the far-field. More details about the physics of RF fields and their analysis and measurement can be found in References 2, 3, 8, 21, 33, 34 and 35.

WHAT BIOLOGICAL EFFECTS CAN BE CAUSED BY RF ENERGY?

A biological effect occurs when a change can be measured in a biological system after the introduction of some type of stimuli. However, the observation of a biological effect, in and of itself, does not necessarily suggest the existence of a biological ***hazard***. A biological effect only becomes a safety hazard when it "causes detectable impairment of the health of the individual or of his or her offspring" (Reference 25).

There are many published reports in the scientific literature concerning possible biological effects resulting from animal or human exposure to RF energy. The following discussion only provides highlights of current knowledge, and it is not meant to be a complete review of the scientific literature in this complex field. A number of references are listed at the end of this document that provide further information and details concerning this topic and some recent research reports that have been published (References 1, 3, 6, 7, 9, 14, 15-19, 21, 25, 26, 28-31, 34, 36, 39-41, 47, 49 and 53).

Biological effects that result from heating of tissue by RF energy are often referred to as "thermal" effects. It has been known for many years that exposure to high levels of RF radiation can be harmful due to the ability of RF energy to heat biological tissue rapidly. This is the principle by which microwave ovens cook food, and exposure to very high RF power densities, i.e., on the order of 100 mW/cm^2 or more, can clearly result in heating of biological tissue and an increase in body temperature. Tissue damage in humans could occur during exposure to high RF levels because of the body's inability to cope with or dissipate the excessive heat that could be generated. Under certain conditions, exposure to RF energy at power density levels of 1-10 mW/cm^2 and above can result in measurable heating of biological tissue (but not necessarily tissue damage). The extent of this heating would depend on several factors including radiation frequency; size, shape, and orientation of the exposed object; duration of exposure; environmental conditions; and efficiency of heat dissipation.

Two areas of the body, the eyes and the testes, are known to be particularly vulnerable to heating by RF energy because of the relative lack of available blood flow to dissipate the excessive heat load (blood circulation is one of the body's major mechanisms for coping with excessive heat). Laboratory experiments have shown that short-term exposure (e.g., 30 minutes to one hour) to very high levels of RF radiation (100-200 mW/cm^2) can cause cataracts in rabbits. Temporary sterility, caused by such effects as changes in sperm count and in sperm motility, is possible after exposure of the testes to high-level RF radiation (or to other forms of energy that produce comparable increases in temperature).

Studies have shown that environmental levels of RF energy routinely encountered by the general public are *far below* levels necessary to produce significant heating and increased body temperature (References 32, 37, 45, 46, 48 and 54). However, there may be situations, particularly workplace environments near high-powered RF sources, where recommended limits for safe exposure of human beings to RF energy could be exceeded. In such cases, restrictive measures or actions may be necessary to ensure the safe use of RF energy.

In addition to intensity, the frequency of an RF electromagnetic wave can be important in determining how much energy is absorbed and, therefore, the potential for harm. The quantity used to characterize this absorption is called the "specific absorption rate" or "SAR," and it is usually expressed in units of watts per kilogram (W/kg) or milliwatts per gram (mW/g). In the far-field of a source of RF energy (e.g., several wavelengths distance from the source) whole-body absorption of RF energy by a standing human adult has been shown to occur at a maximum rate when the frequency of the RF radiation is between about 80 and 100 MHz, depending on the size, shape and height of the individual. In other words, the SAR is at a maximum under these conditions. Because of this "resonance" phenomenon, RF safety standards have taken account of the frequency dependence of whole-body human absorption, and the most restrictive limits on exposure are found in this frequency range (the very high frequency or "VHF" frequency range).

Although not commonly observed, a microwave "hearing" effect has been shown to occur under certain very specific conditions of frequency, signal modulation, and intensity where animals and humans may perceive an RF signal as a buzzing or clicking sound. Although a number of theories have been advanced to explain this effect, the most widely-accepted hypothesis is that the microwave signal produces thermoelastic pressure within the head that is perceived as sound by the auditory apparatus within the ear. This effect is not recognized as a health hazard, and the conditions under which it might occur would rarely be encountered by members of the public. Therefore, this phenomenon should be of little concern to the general population. Furthermore, there is no evidence that it could be caused by telecommunications applications such as wireless or broadcast transmissions.

At relatively low levels of exposure to RF radiation, i.e., field intensities lower than those that would produce significant and measurable heating, the evidence for production of harmful biological effects is ambiguous and unproven. Such effects have sometimes been referred to as "non-thermal" effects. Several years ago publications began appearing in the scientific literature, largely overseas, reporting the observation of a wide range of low-level biological effects. However, in many of these cases further experimental research was unable to reproduce these effects. Furthermore, there has been no determination that such effects might indicate a human health hazard, particularly with regard to long-term exposure.

More recently, other scientific laboratories in North America, Europe and elsewhere have reported certain biological effects after exposure of animals ("*in vivo*") and animal tissue ("*in vitro*") to relatively low levels of RF radiation. These reported effects have included certain changes in the immune system, neurological effects, behavioral effects, evidence for a link between microwave exposure and the action of certain drugs and compounds, a "calcium efflux" effect in brain tissue (exposed under very specific conditions), and effects on DNA.

Some studies have also examined the possibility of a link between RF and microwave exposure and cancer. Results to date have been inconclusive. While some experimental data have suggested a possible link between exposure and tumor formation in animals exposed under certain specific conditions, the results have not been independently replicated. In fact, other studies have failed to find evidence for a causal link to cancer or any related condition. Further research is underway in several laboratories to help resolve this question.

In general, while the possibility of "non-thermal" biological effects may exist, whether or not such effects might indicate a human health hazard is not presently known. Further research is needed to determine the generality of such effects and their possible relevance, if any, to human health. In the meantime, standards-setting organizations and government agencies continue to monitor the latest experimental findings to confirm their validity and determine whether alterations in safety limits are needed in order to protect human health.

WHAT RESEARCH IS BEING DONE ON RF BIOLOGICAL EFFECTS?

For many years research into possible biological effects of RF energy has been carried out in government, academic and industrial laboratories all over the world, and such research is continuing. Past research has resulted in a very large number of scientific publications on this topic, some of which are listed in the reference section of this document. For many years the U.S. Government has sponsored research into the biological effects of RF energy. The majority of this work has been funded by the Department of Defense, due, in part, to the extensive military interest in using RF equipment such as radar and other relatively high-powered radio transmitters for routine military operations. In addition, some U.S. civilian federal agencies responsible for health and safety, such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), have sponsored and conducted research in this area in the past, although relatively little civilian-sector RF research is currently being funded by the U.S. Government. At the present time, much of the non-military research on biological effects of RF energy in the U.S. is being funded by industry organizations such as Motorola, Inc. In general, relatively more research is being carried out overseas, particularly in Europe.

In 1996, the World Health Organization (WHO) established a program (the International EMF Project) designed to review the scientific literature concerning biological effects of electromagnetic fields, identify gaps in knowledge about such effects, recommend research needs, and work towards international resolution of health concerns over the use of RF technology. (*see* Reference 40) The WHO and other organizations maintain Internet Web sites that contain additional information about their programs and about RF biological effects and research (see list of Web sites in **Table 3** of this bulletin). The FDA, the EPA and other federal agencies responsible for public health and safety are working with the WHO and other organizations to monitor developments and identify research needs related to RF biological effects. For example, in 1995 the EPA published the results of a conference it sponsored to assess the current state of knowledge of RF biological effects and to address future research needs in this area (Reference 53).

WHAT LEVELS ARE SAFE FOR EXPOSURE TO RF ENERGY?

Development of Exposure Guidelines

Exposure standards and guidelines have been developed by various organizations and countries over the past several decades. In North America and most of Europe exposure standards and guidelines have generally been based on exposure levels where effects considered harmful to humans occur. Safety factors are then incorporated to arrive at specific levels of exposure to provide sufficient protection for various segments of the population.

Not all standards and guidelines throughout the world have recommended the same limits for exposure. For example, some published exposure limits in Russia and some eastern European countries have been generally more restrictive than existing or proposed recommendations for exposure developed in North America and other parts of Europe. This discrepancy may be due, at least in part, to the possibility that these standards were based on exposure levels where it was believed no biological effects *of any type* would occur. This philosophy is inconsistent with the approach taken by most other standards-setting bodies which base limits on levels where recognized hazards may occur and then incorporate appropriate safety margins to ensure adequate protection.

In the United States, although the Federal Government has never itself developed RF exposure standards, the FCC has adopted and used recognized safety guidelines for evaluating RF environmental exposure since 1985. Federal health and safety agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) have also been actively involved in monitoring and investigating issues related to RF exposure. For example, the FDA has issued guidelines for safe RF emission levels from microwave ovens, and it continues to monitor exposure issues related to the use of certain RF devices such as cellular telephones. NIOSH conducts investigations and health hazard assessments related to occupational RF exposure.