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Power Lines, Electrical Devices, and Extremely Low Frequency Radiation

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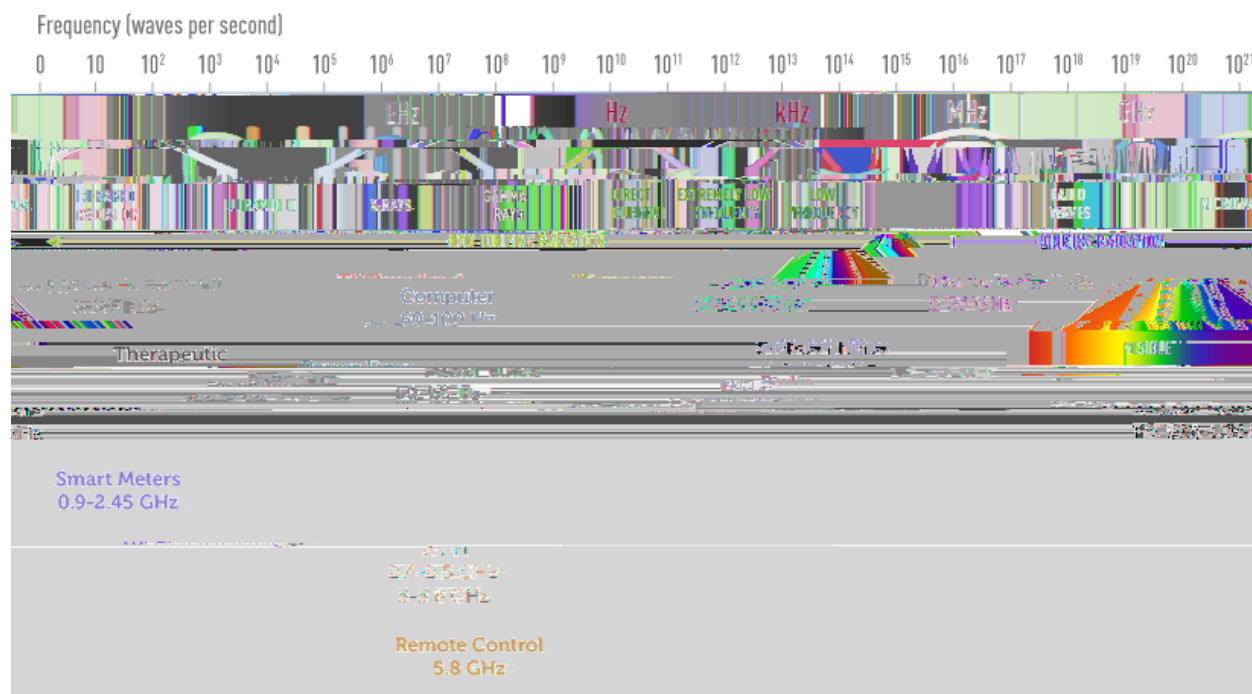
What is extremely low frequency (ELF) radiation?

Radiation is the emission or sending out of energy from any source. X-rays are one example of radiation, but so is the light that comes from the sun and the heat that constantly comes off our bodies.

When talking about radiation and cancer, many people think of specific kinds of radiation such as x-rays or the radiation in nuclear reactors. But these are not the only types of radiation that concern us when we think about radiation risks to human health.

Radiation exists across a spectrum, from very high-energy (also referred to as high-frequency) radiation to very low-energy (or low-frequency) radiation. This is sometimes referred to as the **electromagnetic spectrum**.

ELECTROMAGNETIC SPECTRUM



Examples of high-energy radiation include [x-rays](#) and [gamma rays](#)¹. They, as well as some higher energy [ultraviolet \(UV\) rays](#)², are classified as **ionizing radiation**, which means that they have enough energy to remove an electron from (ionize) an atom. This can damage the DNA inside cells, which can sometimes lead to cancer.

Extremely low frequency (ELF) radiation is at the low-energy end of the electromagnetic spectrum and is a type of **non-ionizing radiation**. Non-ionizing radiation does not have enough energy to directly damage DNA. ELF radiation has even lower energy than other types of non-ionizing radiation like [radiofrequency radiation](#)³ and infrared and visible light.

Although ELF radiation doesn't damage the DNA in cells the way ionizing radiation does and is generally thought to be safe, researchers are studying if there might be other ways that ELF radiation could somehow affect cancer risk.

Electric and magnetic fields

Electromagnetic radiation is made of 2 parts: the electric field and the magnetic field.

Studies in the lab

Several large studies have looked at the possible effects of ELF magnetic fields (ELF-MF) on cancer in rats and mice. These studies exposed the animals to magnetic fields much stronger than what people are normally exposed to at home. Most of these studies have found no increase in the risk of any type of cancer. In fact, the risk of some types of cancer was actually lower in the animals exposed to the ELF radiation.

One study did show an increased risk of tumors that start in thyroid cells, called C-cells, in male rats at some exposures. This increased risk was not seen in female rats or in mice, and was not seen at the highest field strength. These inconsistencies, and the fact that these findings were not seen in the other studies, make it hard for scientists to conclude that the observed increased risk of tumors is from the ELF radiation.

Other studies in mice and rats have looked specifically for increases in leukemia and lymphoma as a result of exposure to ELF radiation, but these studies have also not found a link.

Although there is no clear link between ELF-MF and cancer in animal studies, there is some evidence from animal and cell-based research that ELF-MF may affect living organisms in some ways. For example:

- Some studies suggest that at certain levels of exposure, ELF-MF may affect how information from genes is used for cellular processes.
- Some studies have suggested that ELF-MF might stress cells, which could lead to the creation of reactive oxygen species inside the cells.

Results from different studies looking at these ideas have been inconsistent, and many studies have not found that ELF has any biological impact.

Studies in people

Studying the effects of ELF radiation in people can be hard, for many reasons.

Exposure to ELF radiation is very common, so it's not possible to compare people who are exposed with people who aren't exposed. Instead, studies try to compare people exposed at **higher levels** with people exposed at **lower levels**.

It is very hard to determine how much ELF radiation a person has been exposed to, especially over a long period. As far as we know, the effects of ELF radiation do not add up over time, and there is no test that can measure how much exposure a person has

had.

Researchers can get a snapshot of ELF exposures in different ways, but none of these are perfect:

- They can have a person wear a device that records their exposure levels over hours or days.
- They can measure the magnetic or electrical field strength in a person's home or workplace settings.
- They can estimate exposure based on the wiring configuration of someone's workplace/home or on its distance from power lines.

But all of these methods result in exposure estimates that have a lot of uncertainty. They typically don't account for a person's ELF exposures while in other places, and they don't measure ELF exposures in every location that person has ever lived or worked over their lifetime. As a result, there is no good way to accurately estimate someone's long-term exposure, which is what matters most when looking for possible effects on cancer risk.

In children

A number of studies have looked at a possible link between ELF radiation from **magnetic fields** in the home and the risk of [childhood leukemia](#)⁴, and have had mixed results. Still, when the findings from these studies are combined, a small increase in risk is seen for children at the highest exposure levels compared to those with the lowest exposure levels. Studies looking at the effect of ELF **electric fields** on childhood leukemia risk have not found a link.

Studies have generally not found any strong links between ELF electric or magnetic fields and other types of childhood cancers.

In adults

Several studies have looked at possible links between ELF exposures in adults and cancer. Most have not found a link, although a small number have suggested a possible link.

What expert agencies say

Several national and international agencies study different exposures in the

environment to determine if they can cause cancer. Something that causes cancer or helps cancer grow is called a **carcinogen**. **The American Cancer Society looks to these organizations to evaluate the risks based on evidence from laboratory, animal, and human research studies.**

Based on animal and human evidence like the examples above, some expert agencies have evaluated the potential cancer-causing nature of ELF radiation.

The **International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC)** is part of the World Health Organization (WHO). One of its major goals is to identify causes of cancer. In 2002, IARC considered the evidence for ELF magnetic and electric fields separately:

- It found “limited evidence” in humans for the carcinogenicity of ELF **magnetic fields** in relation to childhood leukemia, with “inadequate evidence” in relation to all other cancers. It found “inadequate evidence” for the carcinogenicity of ELF magnetic fields based on studies in lab animals.
- It found “inadequate evidence” for the carcinogenicity of ELF **electric fields** in humans.

radiation coming from each source, how close you are to each, and how long you spend in the field.

The NIEHS recommends that people concerned about their exposure to EMF (and ELF radiation) find out where their major EMF sources are and move away from them or limit the time spent near them. For example, moving even an arm's length away from a source can dramatically lower exposure to its field.

Power lines

People who are concerned about ELF radiation exposure from high-power electrical lines should keep in mind that the intensity of any exposure goes down significantly as you get farther away from the source. On the ground, the strength of the electromagnetic field is highest directly under the power line. As you get farther away, you are exposed to less and less, with the level eventually matching normal home background levels. The electromagnetic field directly under a power line is typically in the range of what you could be exposed to when using certain household appliances.

If you are concerned about your exposure to electromagnetic sources around you (including power lines), you can measure the field strength with a device called a **gaussmeter**.

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/risk-prevention/radiation-exposure/x-rays-gamma-rays.html
2. www.cancer.org/cancer/risk-prevention/sun-and-uv/uv-radiation.html
3. www.cancer.org/cancer/risk-prevention/radiation-exposure/radiofrequency-radiation.html
4. www.cancer.org/cancer/types/leukemia-in-children.html
5. www.epa.gov
6. www.epa.gov/radiation/radiation-basics
7. www.cancer.gov
8. www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/causes-prevention/risk/radiation/electromagnetic-fields-fact-sheet
9. www.niehs.nih.gov
10. www.niehs.nih.gov/health/topics/agents/emf/index.cfm

11. www.who.int
12. www.who.int/health-topics/electromagnetic-fields

Additional resources

Along with the American Cancer Society, other sources of information and support include:

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Website: www.epa.gov⁵ Radiation Basics: www.epa.gov/radiation/radiation-basics⁶

National Cancer Institute (NCI) Toll-free number: 1-800-422-6237 (1-800-4-CANCER) Website: www.cancer.gov⁷ Electromagnetic Fields and Cancer: www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/causes-prevention/risk/radiation/electromagnetic-fields-fact-sheet⁸

National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences Website: www.niehs.nih.gov⁹ Electric & Magnetic Fields: www.niehs.nih.gov/health/topics/agents/emf/index.cfm¹⁰

World Health Organization Website: www.who.int¹¹ Electromagnetic fields (EMF): www.who.int/health-topics/electromagnetic-fields¹²

**Inclusion on this list does not imply endorsement by the American Cancer Society.*

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cancer care as well as journalists, editors, and translators with extensive experience in medical writing.
