

[<< Back](#)



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Over exposed: A WAFF 48 News report

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HUNTSVILLE, AL (WAFF) - When you think about radiation, you think about a hospital, a bomb or a way to make energy. Truth is, we're exposed to radiation almost every day without even realizing it.

But are we being over-exposed to radiation?

Recent reports claim Americans are exposed to more radiation today than they were 20 years ago.

It's something we pick up daily from the sun, a dental x-ray, a cell phone and even our own drinking water.

Just the word radiation alone can conjure up fears, hysteria, concern and all sorts of conspiracy theories.

We've seen the power of radiation after the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl in 1986 or the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II, both incidents that have been linked to causing widespread cancer in those areas.

But the fear and hysteria about radiation only gets ramped up when the focus points to the one thing today, many would say they can't live without, their cell phones.

"That is a totally different type of radiation, it's at a totally different end of the spectrum and they really don't need to be talked about in the same breath, but they do share the word radiation," said Radiologist Leon Bell at Huntsville Hospital.

There are two different types of radiation. Ionizing radiation and non-ionizing. Bell said things like cell phones and microwaves use non-ionizing radiation, emitting a low-frequency of electromagnetic waves.

Ionizing radiation can come from medical radiation like X-rays and CT scans, which can cause changes to cells in the body and can also increase the risk of cancer.

Doctor Bell said the low-frequency waves coming from cell phones simply can not cause molecular changes in the body leading to cancer.

Cancer and medical radiation have stronger ties. According to the National Council on Radiation Protection, Americans are exposed to seven times more medical radiation today than 20 years ago.

Advancements in the medical field with digital imaging products like X-rays and CT scans may have something to do with it.



"In many cases, the more radiation we give, the more information we can get. It's constant sliding scale to balance between the need to know and the need to avoid radiation," said Dr. Bell.

But when does the need to know go too far?

Last year, Huntsville resident, Becky Coudert was one of dozens of patients who were notified by Huntsville Hospital about receiving "elevated levels" of radiation after getting a CT brain scan.

Coudert said in the weeks following her scan, she began losing her hair, having, headaches, and memory loss.

"Eventually I was told, 'you got a little bit too much,'" said Coudert.

Her hair grew back, but she still wonders what's going on inside her body.

"We are not informed, none of us know that we are getting so much, when we have a cat scan how dangerous it is," said Coudert.

Becky Coudert is not a patient of Doctor Bell nor does he speak for the hospital, but he does offer some insight on medical challenges when it comes to the use of radiation.

"We work under an assumption that there is no absolutely safe level because no one knows where the threshold is between harmless amount of radiation and the extreme end - the amount of radiation people got at Chernobyl or Hiroshima or Nagasaki," said Dr. Bell.

The FDA is now investigating the event at Huntsville Hospital and other instances across the nation of radiation over exposure to patients.

The FDA is already using its regulatory power to push medical imaging companies to install more safety features on their products.

The hope is that a prescribed dose of radiation will be the right dose every time.

Medical procedures like X-rays and radiation therapy used for cancer patients present both benefits and risks, but many won't deny the use of radiation in medicine has changed healthcare as we know it.

When it comes to cell phone and cancer studies, most times it's the cell phone corporations funding the research.

And for patients like Becky Coudert, it may take years to see if cancer will ever truly develop from over radiation.

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