

# RF Radiation and Electromagnetic Field Safety

Although Amateur Radio is basically a safe activity, in recent years there has been considerable discussion and concern about the possible hazards of electromagnetic radiation (EMR), including both RF energy and power frequency (50-60 Hz) electromagnetic fields. Extensive research on this topic is underway in many countries. This section was prepared by members of the ARRL RF Safety Committee and coordinated by Dr Robert E. Gold, WBØKIZ. It summarizes what is now known and offers safety precautions based on the research to date.

All life on Earth has adapted to survive in an environment of weak, natural low-frequency electromagnetic fields (in addition to the Earth's static geomagnetic field). Natural low-frequency EM fields come from two main sources: the sun, and thunderstorm activity. But in the last 100 years, man-made fields at much higher intensities and with a very different spectral distribution have altered this natural EM background in ways that are not yet fully understood. Much more research is needed to assess the biological effects of EMR.

Both RF and 60-Hz fields are classified as *nonionizing radiation* because the frequency is too low for there to be enough photon energy to ionize atoms. Still, at sufficiently high power densities, EMR poses certain health hazards. It has been known since the early days of radio that RF energy can cause injuries by heating body tissue. In extreme cases, RF-induced heating can cause blindness, sterility and other serious health problems. These heat-related health hazards are called *thermal effects*. In addition, there is evidence that magnetic fields may produce biologic effects at energy levels too low to cause body heating. The proposition that these athermal effects may produce harmful health consequences has produced a great deal of research.

In addition to the ongoing research, much else has been done to address this issue. For example, the American National Standards Institute, among others, has recommended voluntary guidelines to limit human exposure to RF energy. And the ARRL has established the RF Safety Committee, a committee of concerned medical doctors and scientists, serving voluntarily to monitor scientific research in the fields and to recommend safe practices for radio amateurs.

## THERMAL EFFECTS OF RF ENERGY

Body tissues that are subjected to very high levels of RF energy may suffer seri-

ous heat damage. These effects depend upon the frequency of the energy, the power density of the RF field that strikes the body, and even on factors such as the polarization of the wave.

At frequencies near the body's natural resonant frequency, RF energy is absorbed more efficiently, and maximum heating occurs. In adults, this frequency usually is about 35 MHz if the person is grounded, and about 70 MHz if the person's body is insulated from the ground. Also, body parts may be resonant; the adult head, for example is resonant around 400 MHz, while a baby's smaller head resonates near 700 MHz. Body size thus determines the frequency at which most RF energy is absorbed. As the frequency is increased above resonance, less RF heating generally occurs. However, additional longitudinal resonances occur at about 1 GHz near the body surface.

Nevertheless, thermal effects of RF energy should not be a major concern for most radio amateurs because of the relatively low RF power we normally use and intermittent nature of most amateur transmissions. Amateurs spend more time listening than transmitting, and many amateur transmissions such as CW and SSB use low-duty-cycle modes. (With FM or RTTY, though, the RF is present continuously at its maximum level during each transmission.) In any event, it is rare for radio amateurs to be subjected to RF fields strong enough to produce thermal effects unless they are fairly close to an energized antenna or unshielded power amplifier. Specific suggestions for avoiding excessive exposure are offered later.

## ATHERMAL EFFECTS OF EMR

Nonthermal effects of EMR may be of greater concern to most amateurs because they involve lower level energy fields. Research about possible health effects resulting from exposure to the lower level energy fields, the athermal effects, has been of two basic types: epidemiological research and laboratory research.

Scientists conduct laboratory research into biological mechanisms by which EMR may affect animals including humans. Epidemiologists look at the health patterns of large groups of people using statistical methods. These epidemiological studies have been inconclusive. By their basic design, these studies do not demonstrate cause and effect, nor do they postulate mechanisms of disease. Instead, epidemiologists look for associations between an environmental factor and an observed pattern of illness. For example, in

the earliest research on malaria, epidemiologists observed the association between populations with high prevalence of the disease and the proximity of mosquito infested swamplands. It was left to the biological and medical scientists to isolate the organism causing malaria in the blood of those with the disease and identify the same organisms in the mosquito population.

In the case of athermal effects, some studies have identified a weak association between exposure to EMF at home or at work and various malignant conditions including leukemia and brain cancer. However, a larger number of equally well designed and performed studies have found no association. A risk ratio of between 1.5 and 2.0 has been observed in positive studies (the number of observed cases of malignancy being 1.5 to 2.0 times the "expected" number in the population). Epidemiologists generally regard a risk ratio of 4.0 or greater to be indicative of a strong association between the cause and effect under study. For example, men who smoke one pack of cigarettes per day increase their risk for lung cancer tenfold compared to nonsmokers, and two packs per day increase the risk to more than 25 times the nonsmokers' risk.

However, epidemiological research by itself is rarely conclusive. Epidemiology only identifies health patterns in groups—it does not ordinarily determine their cause. And there are often confounding factors: Most of us are exposed to many different environmental hazards that may affect our health in various ways. Moreover, not all studies of persons likely to be exposed to high levels of EMR have yielded the same results.

There has also been considerable laboratory research about the biological effects of EMR in recent years. For example, it has been shown that even fairly low levels of EMR can alter the human body's circadian rhythms, affect the manner in which cancer-fighting T lymphocytes function in the immune system, and alter the nature of the electrical and chemical signals communicated through the cell membrane and between cells, among other things.

Much of this research has focused on low-frequency magnetic fields, or on RF fields that are keyed, pulsed or modulated at a low audio frequency (often below 100 Hz). Several studies suggested that humans and animals can adapt to the presence of a steady RF carrier more readily than to an intermittent, keyed or modulated energy source. There is some evidence that while EMR may not directly

cause cancer, it may sometimes combine with chemical agents to promote its growth or inhibit the work of the body's immune system.

None of the research to date conclusively proves that low-level EMR causes adverse health effects. Given the fact that there is a great deal of research ongoing to examine the health consequences of exposure to EMF, the American Physical Society (a national group of highly respected scientists) issued a statement in May 1995 based on its review of available data pertaining to the possible connections of cancer to 60-Hz EMF exposure. This report is exhaustive and should be reviewed by anyone with a serious interest in the field. Among its general conclusions were the following:

1. "The scientific literature and the reports of reviews by other panels show no consistent, significant link between cancer and powerline fields."
2. "No plausible biophysical mechanisms for the systematic initiation or promotion of cancer by these extremely weak 60-Hz fields has been identified."
3. "While it is impossible to prove that no deleterious health effects occur from exposure to any environmental factor, it is necessary to demonstrate a consistent, significant, and causal relationship before one can conclude that such effects do occur."

The APS study is limited to exposure to 60-Hz EMF. Amateurs will also be interested in exposure to EMF in the RF range. A 1995 publication entitled *Radio Frequency and ELF Electromagnetic Ener-*

*gies, A Handbook for Health Professionals* includes a chapter called "Biologic Effects of RF Fields." In it the authors state: "In conclusion, the data do not support the finding that exposure to RF fields is a causal agent for any type of cancer" (page 176). Later in the same chapter they write: "Although the data base has grown substantially over the past decades, much of the information concerning nonthermal effects is generally inconclusive, incomplete, and sometimes contradictory. Studies of human populations have not demonstrated any reliably effected end point." (page 186).

Readers may want to follow this topic as further studies are reported. Amateurs should be aware that exposure to RF and ELF (60 Hz) electromagnetic fields at all power levels and frequencies may not be completely safe. Prudent avoidance of any avoidable EMR is always a good idea. However, an Amateur Radio operator should not be fearful of using his equipment. If any risk does exist, it will almost surely fall well down on the list of causes that may be harmful to your health (on the other end of the list from your automobile).

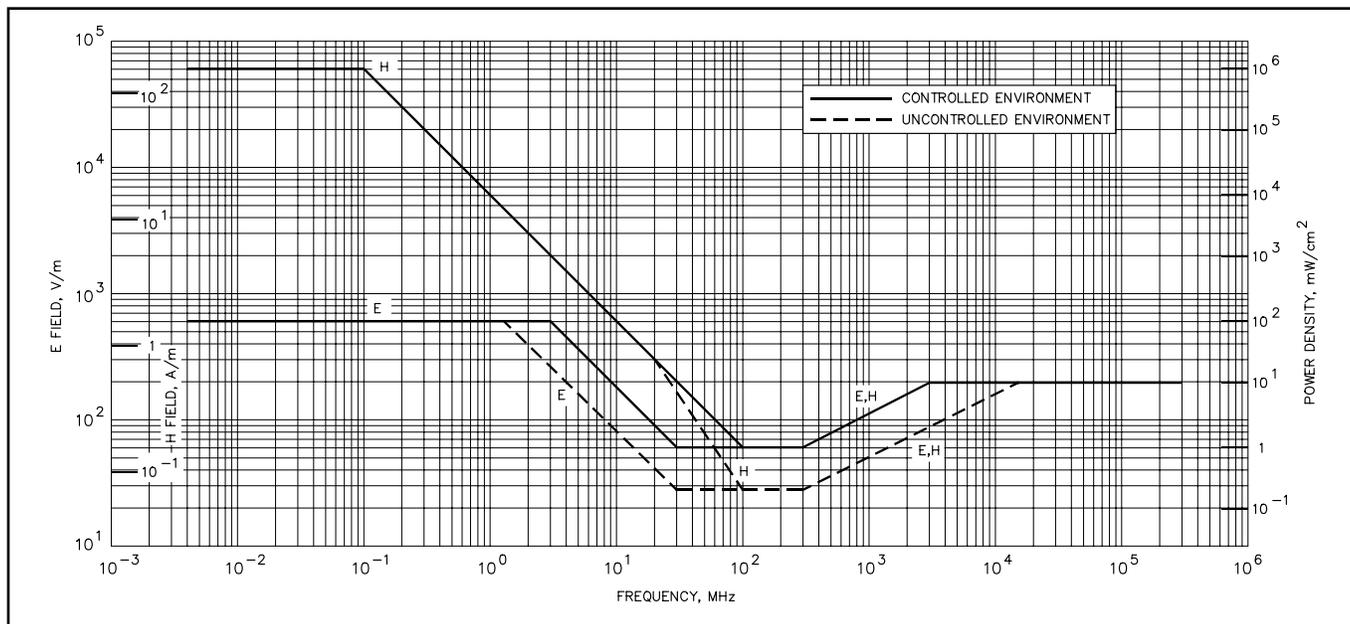
### Safe Exposure Levels

How much EM energy is safe? Scientists have devoted a great deal of effort to deciding upon safe RF-exposure limits. This is a very complex problem, involving difficult public health and economic considerations. The recommended safe levels have been revised downward several times in recent years—and not all scientific bod-

ies agree on this question even today. A new Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) guideline for recommended EM exposure limits went into effect in 1991 (see Bibliography). It replaced a 1982 American National Standards Institute guideline that permitted somewhat higher exposure levels. ANSI-recommended exposure limits before 1982 were higher still.

This new IEEE guideline recommends frequency-dependent and time-dependent maximum permissible exposure levels. Unlike earlier versions of the standard, the 1991 standard recommends different RF exposure limits in *controlled environments* (that is, where energy levels can be accurately determined and everyone on the premises is aware of the presence of EM fields) and in *uncontrolled environments* (where energy levels are not known or where some persons present may not be aware of the EM fields).

The graph in **Fig 9.8** depicts the new IEEE standard. It is necessarily a complex graph because the standards differ not only for controlled and uncontrolled environments but also for electric fields (E fields) and magnetic fields (H fields). Basically, the lowest E-field exposure limits occur at frequencies between 30 and 300 MHz. The lowest H-field exposure levels occur at 100-300 MHz. The ANSI standard sets the maximum E-field limits between 30 and 300 MHz at a power density of 1 mW/cm<sup>2</sup> (61.4 V/m) in controlled environments—but at one-fifth that level (0.2 mW/cm<sup>2</sup> or 27.5 V/m) in uncontrolled environments. The H-field



**Fig 9.8—1991 RF protection guidelines for body exposure of humans. It is known officially as the "IEEE Standard for Safety Levels with Respect to Human Exposure to Radio Frequency Electromagnetic Fields, 3 kHz to 300 GHz."**

limit drops to 1 mW/cm<sup>2</sup> (0.163 A/m) at 100-300 MHz in controlled environments and 0.2 mW/cm<sup>2</sup> (0.0728 A/m) in uncontrolled environments. Higher power densities are permitted at frequencies below 30 MHz (below 100 MHz for H fields) and above 300 MHz, based on the concept that the body will not be resonant at those frequencies and will therefore absorb less energy.

In general, the IEEE guideline requires averaging the power level over time periods ranging from 6 to 30 minutes for power-density calculations, depending on the frequency and other variables. The ANSI exposure limits for uncontrolled environments are lower than those for controlled environments, but to compensate for that the guideline allows exposure levels in those environments to be averaged over much longer time periods (generally 30 minutes). This long averaging time means that an intermittently operating RF source (such as an Amateur Radio transmitter) will show a much lower power density than a continuous-duty station for a given power level and antenna configuration.

Time averaging is based on the concept that the human body can withstand a greater rate of body heating (and thus, a higher level of RF energy) for a short time than for a longer period. However, time averaging may not be appropriate in considerations of nonthermal effects of RF energy.

The IEEE guideline excludes any transmitter with an output below 7 W because such low-power transmitters would not be able to produce significant whole-body heating. (However, recent studies show that hand-held transceivers often produce power densities in excess of the IEEE standard within the head.)

There is disagreement within the scientific community about these RF exposure guidelines. The IEEE guideline is still intended primarily to deal with thermal effects, not exposure to energy at lower levels. A small but significant number of researchers now believe athermal effects should also be taken into consideration. Several European countries and localities in the United States have adopted stricter standards than the recently updated IEEE standard.

Another national body in the United States, the National Council for Radiation Protection and Measurement (NCRP), has also adopted recommended exposure guidelines. NCRP urges a limit of 0.2 mW/cm<sup>2</sup> for nonoccupational exposure in the 30-300 MHz range. The NCRP guideline differs from IEEE in two notable ways: It takes into account the effects of modula-

tion on an RF carrier, and it does not exempt transmitters with outputs below 7 W.

### Cardiac Pacemakers and RF Safety

It is a widely held belief that cardiac pacemakers may be adversely affected in their function by exposure to electromagnetic fields. Amateurs with pacemakers may ask whether their operating might endanger themselves or visitors to their shacks who have a pacemaker. Because of this and similar concerns regarding other sources of electromagnetic fields, pacemaker manufacturers apply design methods that for the most part shield the pacemaker circuitry from even relatively high EM field strengths.

It is recommended that any amateur who

has a pacemaker or is being considered for one discuss this matter with his or her physician. The physician will probably put the amateur into contact with the technical representative of the pacemaker manufacturer. These representatives are generally excellent resources and may have data from laboratory or "in the field" studies with pacemaker units of the type the amateur needs to know about.

One study examined the function of a modern (dual chamber) pacemaker in and around an Amateur Radio station. The pacemaker generator has circuits that receive and process electrical signals produced by the heart and also generate electrical signals that stimulate (pace) the heart. In one series of experiments the pacemaker was connected to a heart simulator. The system was

**Table 9.1**  
**Typical 60-Hz Magnetic Fields Near Amateur Radio Equipment and AC-Powered Household Appliances**

Values are in milligauss.

<i>Item</i>	<i>Field</i>	<i>Distance</i>
Electric blanket	30-90	Surface
Microwave oven	10-100 1-10	Surface 12"
IBM personal computer	5-10 0-1	Atop monitor 15" from screen
Electric drill	500-2000	At handle
Hair dryer	200-2000	At handle
HF transceiver	10-100 1-5	Atop cabinet 15" from front
1-kW RF amplifier	80-1000 1-25	Atop cabinet 15" from front

(Source: measurements made by members of the ARRL RF Safety Committee)

**Table 9.2**  
**Typical RF Field Strengths Near Amateur Radio Antennas**

A sampling of values as measured by the Federal Communications Commission and Environmental Protection Agency, 1990

<i>Antenna Type</i>	<i>Freq (MHz)</i>	<i>Power (W)</i>	<i>E Field (V/m)</i>	<i>Location</i>
Dipole in attic	14.15	100	7-100	In home
Discone in attic	146.5	250	10-27	In home
Half sloper	21.5	1000	50	1 m from base
Dipole at 7-13 ft	7.14	120	8-150	1-2 m from earth
Vertical	3.8	800	180	0.5 m from base
5-element Yagi at 60 ft	21.2	1000	10-20 14	In shack 12 m from base
3-element Yagi at 25 ft	28.5	425	8-12	12 m from base
Inverted V at 22-46 ft	7.23	1400	5-27	Below antenna
Vertical on roof	14.11	140	6-9 35-100	In house At antenna tuner
Whip on auto roof	146.5	100	22-75 15-30 90	2 m from antenna In vehicle Rear seat
5-element Yagi at 20 ft	50.1	500	37-50	10 m from antenna

placed on top of the cabinet of a 1-kW HF linear amplifier during SSB and CW operation. In addition, the system was placed in close proximity to several 1 to 5-W 2-meter hand-held transceivers. The test pacemaker connected to the heart simulator was also placed on the ground 9 meters below and 5 meters in front of a three-element Yagi HF antenna. No interference with pacemaker function was observed in this experimental system.

Although the possibility of interference cannot be entirely ruled out by these few observations, these tests represent more severe exposure to EM fields than would ordinarily be encountered by an amateur with an average amount of common sense. Of course prudence dictates that amateurs with pacemakers using hand-held VHF transceivers keep the antenna as far from the site of the implanted pacemaker generator as possible and use the lowest transmitter output required for adequate communication. For high power HF transmission, the antenna should be as far from the operating position as possible and all equipment should be properly grounded.

### Low-Frequency Fields

Recently, much concern about EMR has focused on low-frequency energy rather than RF. Amateur Radio equipment can be a significant source of low-frequency magnetic fields, although there are many

other sources of this kind of energy in the typical home. Magnetic fields can be measured relatively accurately with inexpensive 60-Hz dosimeters that are made by several manufacturers.

**Table 9.1** shows typical magnetic field intensities of Amateur Radio equipment and various household items. Because these fields dissipate rapidly with distance, “prudent avoidance” would mean staying perhaps 12 to 18 inches away from most Amateur Radio equipment (and 24 inches from power supplies with 1-kW RF amplifiers) whenever the ac power is turned on. The old custom of leaning over a linear amplifier on a cold winter night to keep warm may not be the best idea!

There are currently no non-occupational US standards for exposure to low-frequency fields. However, some epidemiological evidence suggests that when the general level of 60-Hz fields exceeds 2 milligauss, there is an increased cancer risk in both domestic environments and industrial environments. Typical home environments (not close to appliances or power lines) are in the range of 0.1-0.5 milligauss.

### Determining RF Power Density

Unfortunately, determining the power density of the RF fields generated by an amateur station is not as simple as measuring low-frequency magnetic fields. Although sophisticated instruments can be used to measure RF power densities quite

accurately, they are costly and require frequent recalibration. Most amateurs don't have access to such equipment, and the inexpensive field-strength meters that we do have are not suitable for measuring RF power density. The best we can usually do is to estimate our own RF power density based on measurements made by others or, given sufficient computer programming skills, use computer modeling techniques.

**Table 9.2** shows a sampling of measurements made at Amateur Radio stations by the Federal Communications Commission and the Environmental Protection Agency in 1990. As this table indicates, a good antenna well removed from inhabited areas poses no hazard under any of the various exposure guidelines. However, the FCC/EPA survey also indicates that amateurs must be careful about using indoor or attic-mounted antennas, mobile antennas, low directional arrays or any other antenna that is close to inhabited areas, especially when moderate to high power is used.

Ideally, before using any antenna that is in close proximity to an inhabited area, you should measure the RF power density. If that is not feasible, the next best option is to make the installation as safe as possible by observing the safety suggestions listed in **Table 9.3**.

It is also possible, of course, to calculate the probable power density near an antenna using simple equations. However, such calculations have many pitfalls. For one, most of the situations in which the power density would be high enough to be of concern are in the near field—an area roughly bounded by several wavelengths of the antenna. In the near field, ground interactions and other variables produce power densities that cannot be determined by simple arithmetic.

Computer antenna-modeling programs such as MININEC or other codes derived from NEC (Numerical Electromagnetics Code) are suitable for estimating RF magnetic and electric fields around amateur antenna systems. (See the **Propagation** chapter for more information about MININEC.) And yet, these too have limitations. Ground interactions must be considered in estimating near-field power densities. Also, computer modeling is not sophisticated enough to predict “hot spots” in the near field—places where the field intensity may be far higher than would be expected.

Intensely elevated but localized fields often can be detected by professional measuring instruments. These “hot spots” are often found near wiring in the shack and metal objects such as antenna masts or equipment cabinets. But even with the best instrumentation, these measurements may also be misleading in the near field.

**Table 9.3**

### RF Awareness Guidelines

These guidelines were developed by the ARRL RF Safety Committee, based on the FCC/EPA measurements of Table 9.2 and other data.

- Although antennas on towers (well away from people) pose no exposure problem, make certain that the RF radiation is confined to the antennas' radiating elements themselves. Provide a single, good station ground (earth), and eliminate radiation from transmission lines. Use good coaxial cable, not open-wire lines or end-fed antennas that come directly into the transmitter area.
- No person should ever be near any transmitting antenna while it is in use. This is especially true for mobile or ground-mounted vertical antennas. Avoid transmitting with more than 25 W in a VHF mobile installation unless it is possible to first measure the RF fields inside the vehicle. At the 1-kW level, both HF and VHF directional antennas should be at least 35 ft above inhabited areas. Avoid using indoor and attic-mounted antennas if at all possible.
- Don't operate high-power amplifiers with the covers removed, especially at VHF/UHF.
- In the UHF/SHF region, never look into the open end of an activated length of waveguide or point it toward anyone. Never point a high-gain, narrow-bandwidth antenna (a paraboloid, for instance) toward people. Use caution in aiming an EME (moonbounce) array toward the horizon; EME arrays may deliver an effective radiated power of 250,000 W or more.
- With hand-held transceivers, keep the antenna away from your head and use the lowest power possible to maintain communications. Use a separate microphone and hold the rig as far away from you as possible.
- Don't work on antennas that have RF power applied.
- Don't stand or sit close to a power supply or linear amplifier when the ac power is turned on. Stay at least 24 inches away from power transformers, electrical fans and other sources of high-level 60-Hz magnetic fields.

One need not make precise measurements or model the exact antenna system, however, to develop some idea of the relative fields around an antenna. Computer modeling using close approximations of the geometry and power input of the antenna will generally suffice. Those who are familiar with MININEC can estimate their power densities by computer modeling, and those who have access to professional power-density meters can make useful measurements.

While our primary concern is ordinarily the intensity of the signal radiated by an antenna, we should also remember that there are other potential energy sources to be considered. You can also be exposed to RF radiation directly from a power amplifier if it is operated without proper shielding. Transmission lines may also radiate a significant amount of energy under some conditions.

### FURTHER RF EXPOSURE SUGGESTIONS

Potential exposure situations should be taken seriously. Based on the FCC/EPA measurements and other data, the "RF awareness" guidelines of Table 9.3 were developed by the ARRL RF Safety Committee. A longer version of these guidelines, along with a complete list of references, appeared in a *QST* article by Ivan Shulman, MD, WC2S (see Bibliography).

In addition, *QST* carries information regarding the latest developments for RF safety precautions and regulations at the local and federal levels.

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An excellent and timely document is available on the Internet by an anonymous FTP from: [rtfm.mit.edu, /pub/usenet-by-group/news.answers.powerlines-cancer-faq/part1](http://rtfm.mit.edu/pub/usenet-by-group/news.answers.powerlines-cancer-faq/part1) and [part2](http://rtfm.mit.edu/pub/usenet-by-group/news.answers.powerlines-cancer-faq/part2).

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