

Electric and Magnetic Fields and Health

How Is EMF Measured and What Are Typical Levels in the Home?

Electric fields are measured in units of volts per meter (V/m) and magnetic fields are measured in milligauss (mG), microtesla (μT) or millitesla (mT) ($1 \text{ mG} = 0.1 \mu\text{T} = 0.0001 \text{ mT}$). The highest levels of EMF are measured directly near the source, and decrease rapidly with distance. Since electric fields are easily blocked or weakened by walls or other objects, more research has been conducted on magnetic fields.

In our homes, magnetic fields are generated from appliances, the wiring that powers those appliances, the distribution lines that deliver electricity to the home, and any currents flowing on water pipes. Magnetic fields from nearby transmission lines also have the potential to contribute to the magnetic-field levels inside a home, but since magnetic fields decrease rapidly as you get farther away from the source, the contribution of transmission lines to a home's magnetic-field level may be less than from other closer sources. The typical average level of magnetic fields in homes in the United States measured away from appliances is approximately 1 mG, while in close proximity to common appliances that are in use, the magnetic-field level can range from tens to hundreds of mG (Table 1).



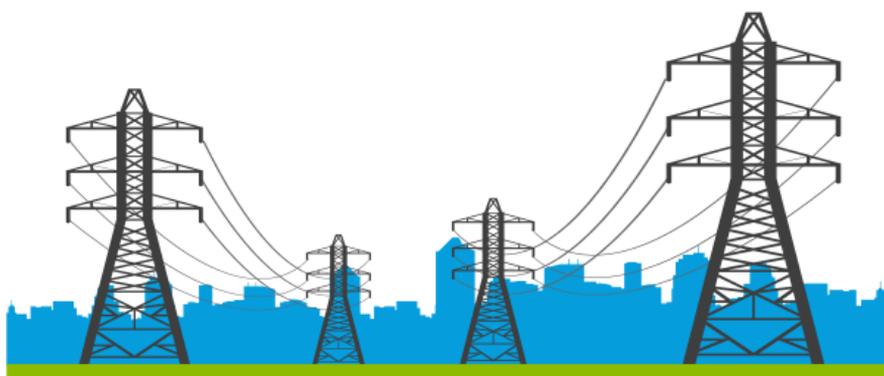
Table 1. Magnetic Fields Measured from Appliances

Source	Distance from Source*		
	6 inches (mG)	1 foot (mG)	2 feet (mG)
Can Opener	600	150	20
Vacuum Cleaner	300	60	10
Hair Dryer	300	1	–
Portable Heater	100	20	4
Electric Range	30	8	2
Dishwasher	20	10	4
Toaster	10	3	–
Coffee Maker	7	–	–

Source: EMF Questions and Answers (NIEHS, 2002)

* The numbers represent the median magnetic field (i.e., half of the appliances tested had higher levels and half had lower levels than those shown in the figure).

Equipment within substations also produces magnetic fields, but here too, the fields drop off quickly with distance. At the boundary of substation sites, the magnetic field from substation equipment is typically within the range of levels found inside our homes. The dominant source of magnetic fields near substation boundaries is the power lines serving the substation.



How Are Potential Health Effects Studied?

There are three main approaches that scientists use to study potential effects of exposure to any physical, chemical, or biological agent, including EMF. Over the past 35 years, thousands of studies have been published in research areas related to EMF.

Epidemiologic studies are conducted among people to observe if persons with a disease (such as cancer) experienced higher exposures to EMF than persons without that disease.

Laboratory animal studies (also called *in vivo* studies) are conducted in laboratory animals, most commonly mice and rats, to test whether extended exposures to high levels of EMF cause increased rates of disease or toxic effects.

Laboratory studies of cells and tissues (also called *in vitro* studies) are conducted to see if exposure to EMF can cause any changes in biological processes that could lead to disease.

How Are Scientific Conclusions Drawn from Health Studies?

First and foremost, no single study or a selected small group of studies can form the sole basis of a valid scientific assessment. The method that scientists use to conduct health risk assessments involves the evaluation of all relevant studies in the three main research areas discussed above. The three areas have varying strengths and limitations, thus, they contribute different information to a scientific evaluation and have to be weighed together. Because epidemiologic studies are conducted among people, the main interest of health research, they provide highly relevant scientific evidence. *In vivo* studies can be well controlled by the investigators and can expose animals to high levels of exposure for long time periods up to the entire lifetime of the animals. While animal studies require extrapolation between species, these tests form the primary basis for assessing the safety of all drugs

and medicines. *In vitro* laboratory studies may contribute to better scientific understanding of biological processes and potential exposure effects on a cellular level; however, because cells and tissues may not react the same way in experimental settings as in intact organisms, no direct conclusions can be drawn from *in vitro* studies about disease and adverse health effects. In the overall evaluation, scientists look for overall patterns within and across the three research areas. Epidemiology and *in vivo* studies have primary importance, while *in vitro* studies contribute secondary information in the assessment of scientific evidence. Studies also vary greatly in their quality, thus, each study contributes different weight in the overall evaluation. Higher quality studies contribute more weight, while lower quality studies contribute less weight, and studies with very poor methods may not contribute at all.



What Have Authoritative Scientific Organizations Concluded?

Numerous scientific organizations have assembled groups of independent scientists with expertise in a variety of disciplines to perform comprehensive reviews of EMF research. These organizations include the International Agency for Research on Cancer, the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation, the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, the World Health Organization, and most recently in 2015, a Scientific Committee of the European Commission. Overall, the conclusions of these panels are consistent and can be summarized generally, as follows:

- The research does not support the conclusion that EMF causes any long-term, adverse health effects.
- Some epidemiologic studies have reported a statistical association between high, average magnetic-field levels and childhood leukemia. No authoritative agency has concluded, however, that magnetic fields cause childhood leukemia due to the limitations of these studies and the lack of evidence from laboratory studies.
- The *in vivo* studies, overall, do not report an increase in cancer among animals exposed to high levels of EMF even after lifetime exposures.
- The *in vitro* studies provide no explanation as to how magnetic fields could cause disease.



What Are Electric and Magnetic Fields?

Electric and magnetic fields surround anything that generates, transmits, or uses electricity.

Electric fields result from voltage that pushes electric current through an electrical wire.

Magnetic fields are produced when electrical current flows through wires and electrical devices.

Together, these electric and magnetic fields from electric power sources are commonly referred to as EMF.

Since electricity plays an important role in modern life and in almost everything we do, EMF can be found almost everywhere. The electricity system that is used to transmit and distribute electricity (e.g., transmission lines, distribution lines, and substations) is a source of EMF. When we use electricity in our homes, offices, schools, workplaces, hospitals, and public areas to power the many appliances, devices, and equipment we use for work, leisure, and transportation, EMF also are present.

Are There Guidelines That Limit Exposure to EMF?

There are no federal exposure limits in the United States and no state agency has adopted exposure limits based on a finding that EMF causes adverse health effects. Scientific organizations, however, have recommended exposure guidelines to protect the general public and workers from very high EMF levels, that have the potential to cause nerve and muscle stimulation, which are short-term and reversible effects. EMF levels found in our environment, including those near high-voltage power lines, however, are far too low to cause these effects.



Where Can I Find More Information?

Health Canada

<http://healthycanadians.gc.ca/healthy-living-vie-saine/environment-environnement/home-maison/emf-cem-eng.php>

National Cancer Institute

<http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Risk/magnetic-fields>

World Health Organization

<http://www.who.int/peh-emf/en/>

National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences

http://www.niehs.nih.gov/health/materials/electric_and_magnetic_fields_associated_with_the_use_of_electric_power_questions_and_answers_english_508.pdf

European Commission – SCENIHR

http://ec.europa.eu/health/scientific_committees/consultations/public_consultations/scenihr_consultation_19_en.htm

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