



This **special issue** of the BERENIS newsletter summarizes the current knowledge on biological effects of millimeter waves (MMW) in the frequency range from 5.8 to 200 GHz, and it provides an assessment of the possible correlation between exposure and its effects and impact related to health. This is based on the identification and evaluation of relevant experimental animal and cell studies as well as studies with humans published in the period from the beginning of 2019 to August 2024. In May 2025, the FOEN published a comprehensive and more detailed report in German¹. This special issue contains a short version of the report.

Electromagnetic fields in the frequency range 5.8-200 GHz - Biological effects and consequences for health

Introduction and aims of this report

Millimeter waves (MMW, wavelengths in the millimeter range), hence, radiofrequency electromagnetic fields (RF-EMF) with frequencies above 6 GHz, are currently not used for mobile communications in Switzerland. With the increasing use of mobile communication and associated changes in the technologies, an implementation of MMW can be anticipated in the future to increase bandwidth. Knowledge about potential biological effects of RF-EMF in the new frequency bands for mobile communication is limited, and their possible health effects still remain largely unexplored.

Characteristics of millimeter waves

For frequencies above 6 GHz, absorption mainly occurs on the surface of the exposed cells, animals and humans. A suitable measure for the exposure of tissues is the incident power density (IPD; expressed in W/m^2) ². Energy absorption (exposure intensity multiplied by duration per volume) can lead to a local or systemic increase in temperature, which triggers thermoregulation in the organism or causes metabolic and physiological changes. Thus, heating-related impact should also be taken into account, in addition to the putative athermal effects on biological functions and mechanisms. Such temperature increases can either be directly measured or estimated using computational modelling methods.

The **aim** of this special newsletter issue is to summarize the current knowledge about biological effects of MMW in the frequency range from 5.8 to 200 GHz and to assess the potential health impact of exposure. The health-related effects from many different experimental endpoints relate primarily to cancer, neurological and skin diseases, but also include other biological processes such as reproduction and fertility, developmental, cognitive and physiological aspects, as well as mechanisms involved in various physiological and pathological processes, such as oxidative stress and programmed cell death (apoptosis).

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¹ <u>www.bafu.admin.ch</u> (Topic: Electrosmog and light > Publications and studies > Studies), and https://www.aramis.admin.ch/Dokument.aspx?DocumentID=73167

 $^{^2}$ In order to protect the population from excessive thermal effects, ICNIRP (2020) recommends reference values for whole-body exposure (under far-field conditions) of 10 W/m², averaged over 30 minutes. For local exposures (parts of the body), the reference value is depending on the frequency: i.e., between 40 W/m² (at 6 GHz) and 20 W/m² (at 300 GHz), averaged over 4 cm² and 6 minutes, as well as between 60 W/m² (at 30 GHz) and 40 W/m² (at 300 GHz), averaged over 1 cm² and 6 minutes.





Methods

Systematic selection of studies

This newsletter is based on a systematic review (see German report³), following standardised guidelines that take into account the selection of studies according to PECO criteria (population, exposure, comparisons and results), a systematic literature search in at least two databases and documentation in accordance with the PRISMA guidelines [1, 2]. This systematic review was conducted in accordance with scientific recommendations [3, 4] and considered experimental studies with cell cultures ('in vitro'), animals and volunteers ('in vivo'), and biological effects or mechanisms, and independently assessed these in a systematic evaluation. A synthesis of the study results was discussed with respect to relevance for health in the following categories:

- 1. carcinogenesis, neurodegenerative and other neurological diseases
- 2. diseases/effects on the highest exposed organs such as the skin and the eyes including thermal effects
- 3. cardiovascular and immunological diseases
- 4. fertility, reproduction and developmental processes
- 5. cellular vitality, proliferation and senescence
- 6. stress response and (cellular) homeostasis
- 7. genetic and epigenetic integrity (transcriptomics/proteomics)
- 8. studies with humans, besides characteristics on health, perception is included

Study assessment

Individual studies were assessed and evaluated for their quality by a Risk of Bias (RoB) analysis. This risk of bias analysis evaluates the studies in various domains, regarding sensitivity and risk of systemic errors, and it also provides a measure for the confidence in the results for the respective outcome. The final assessment was made using the GRADE approach (Grading of Recommendations Assessment, Development and Evaluation⁴), according to standardised guidelines in accordance with OHAT [3, 4] with minor adjustments for animal and cell studies.

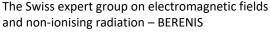
Summary and assessment of MMW

For the period from early 2019 to August 2024, a total of 56 eligible studies, 29 animal/human studies and 28 cell studies, were identified and assessed. Most studies were conducted in the sub-MMW frequency range from 5.8 to 29 GHz (n=16 *in vivo*, n=10 *in vitro*), followed by studies with MMW in the frequency range 50-100 GHz (n=5 *in vivo*, n=13 *in vitro*), 101-200 GHz (n=3 *in vivo*, n=6 *in vitro*) and 30-49 GHz (n=3 *in vivo*, n=3 *in vitro*). In the risk of bias analysis, significant limitations with regard to exposure and dosimetry were assigned to 20 animal studies. Most of them (n=14) also have limitations in the temperature assessment, which is particularly relevant for some of the assessed outcome categories, for example: 4. fertility, reproduction and developmental processes. Similar limitations in different domains were also found in the assessment of the cell studies.

In the publication period under consideration, there is only one animal study on carcinogenesis related to MMW in the frequency range 5.8-29 GHz [5], which has various limitations in the study quality.

³ <u>www.bafu.admin.ch</u> (Topic: Electrosmog and light > Publications and studies > Studies), and <u>https://www.aramis.admin.ch/Dokument.aspx?DocumentID=73167</u>

⁴ https://www.gradeworkinggroup.org





Therefore, the available data does not allow any statements on potential cancer risks from MMW. Well-controlled studies on genotoxicity provide no evidence for carcinogenic effects from MMW within the regulatory limits in any of the frequency ranges [6-8]. These findings are generally consistent with recent studies in which various cell models were exposed to RF-EMF used for mobile communication in the pre-5G era [9-11]. Other relevant factors for carcinogenesis are effects on cell viability and cell proliferation. Yet, the current knowledge does not allow for any clear conclusions to be drawn about the impact of MMW exposure, as the confidence in the available evidence is generally low, and many different experimental approaches have been pursued.

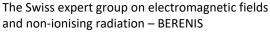
Studies on potential health effects of MMW on the cardiovascular or the immune system provide contradictory results based on functional assays and biomarkers [12-16]. Only two *in vivo* studies with RF-EMF in the frequency range of 5.8-29 GHz, and outcomes related to cardiovascular diseases were identified [12, 17]. However, their findings regarding ECG and structural changes in the heart tissue were contradictory. Studies on cell cultures indicated a temporary increase in inflammation markers and an activation of the immune system after exposure in the frequency range 5.8-29 GHz [15, 16].

Effects of MMW on fertility, reproduction and developmental processes have been investigated in eight studies [18-25]. Taking into account the study quality, there is some evidence for adverse effects on reproduction and developmental processes by RF-EMF in the frequency range of 5.8-29 GHz, indicated by the multigenerational study in *C. elegans* with exposure at an early developmental stage and chronic exposure (SAR: 4 W/kg) [25]. Yet, no signs of oxidative stress were found with short-term strong exposure to 9.4 GHz RF-EMF [20].

An increase in cellular and/or oxidative stress could be responsible for these observations in the multigeneration study, as well as for the deficits in memory performance. This has also been described in studies with frequencies above 10 GHz [26, 27] and below 5.8 GHz (see review by Schuermann and Mevissen [28]). Effects and consequences of oxidative stress were addressed in a previously published BERENIS newsletter (special issue January 2021). Two older studies with limited quality provide indications for activity changes of enzymes that regulate the oxidative balance induced by MMW in different tissues [29, 30].

Deficits in memory performance and structural changes in various brain structures were reported in two studies with exposure in the frequency range 5.8-29 GHz [31, 32]. Studies in rodents and with primary neuronal cells indicated an inhibition of pain after exposure to higher frequencies (>60 GHz) [33-36]. Yet, the findings regarding the transmission of neuronal signals, i.e., synaptic transmission, are inconclusive [34, 35]. Global analyses of gene expression and proteins were performed to identify mechanisms and biomarkers for observed effects of MMW regarding neurological deficits, impacts on the immune system and therapeutical applications. Using this profiling approach, it was convincingly shown that exposure-dependent changes in gene expression by 60 GHz MMW (200 W/m²) were predominantly caused by thermal responses [37]. This highlights the importance of temperature control and dosimetry in the *in vitro* exposure model systems.

The studies on thermal effects, especially on skin and eye tissues, which are considered the most relevant targets of MMW exposure, are based on various model systems, i.e., rabbits, rats and mice, pigs, volunteers as well as different cell types [15, 27, 38-44]. The results reported are consistent with the conclusions of previously published reviews [45-47]. Most studies conducted with MMW have focussed on therapeutic applications, particularly for treatment of pain [13, 42, 48], whereas investigations on thermal thresholds of MMW exposure were scarce. A temperature increase of 0.9-1°C at the fingertip of human volunteers was reported as the threshold for pain caused by 28 GHz MMW in the range of 1260-3990 W/m² [42]. One study indicates an increase in the probability of damage to the rabbit eye at high incident power densities (1730, 2520, 3680 W/m²) [40]. For MMW in the frequency bands that may be used by future telecommunication technologies, the dosimetry and





experimental evidence is incomplete, and not very detailed with regard to temperature and thermal effects. In combination with the variety of experimental approaches used, it is not possible to draw firm conclusions about thermal effects of MMW on human skin and eye tissue.

Manifested by energy deposition and tissue heating, cell stress due to thermal action can cause protein mis-folding and an elevation in the expression of heat shock proteins. This effect has been investigated, and it was occasionally demonstrated in several studies at various MMW frequencies, IPDs, exposure durations and cell types [6, 7, 37, 49-56]. However, no changes of heat shock proteins were detected when ocular cells were exposed for 24 hours to RF-EMF (IPD: 10 W/m²) at frequencies of 5.8 GHz [7], 40 GHz [6] or 60 GHz [56]. Recent studies on hyperthermia focused on tumour therapy, in which intensive pulses with 58.4 GHz MMW caused heat shock reactions and permeability of the cell membrane [57-59]. However, effects that were attributed to increased permeability of the cell membrane were also observed after exposure to 60 GHz (IPD: 200 W/m²) [60]. There is a lack of well-conducted studies in mammals, and the confidence in the available experimental evidence is generally limited. Thus, the understanding of underlying mechanisms remains incomplete.

Conclusions

The studies on thermal effects of MMW show a temperature increase in laboratory animals, depending on the frequency and intensity. The available data do not allow any firm statements on possible threshold values, but there are indications that human volunteers can detect a local temperature increase of 1° C (in the range $1260\text{-}3990 \text{ W/m}^2$). The evidence from studies on therapeutic applications suggests that especially pulsed RF-EMF exposure is an interesting method for cancer therapy, particularly for superficial skin tumours.

Some of the *in vivo* studies provide evidence for impaired learning behaviour as well as structural changes in the brain, which was associated with oxidative stress in some cases, as it has already been observed at lower frequencies (<5.8 GHz). At higher frequencies in the MMW range (>60 GHz), there are indications for altered neuronal activity, though these effects went in both directions depending on the study. Evidence from cell studies indicates an increased permeability of cell membranes after exposure to >60 GHz. The cause of this is still a matter of speculation, but it may be due to oxidative stress or effects on membrane channels, especially when pulsed MMW are used. Gene activity analyses were partially in line with the observed changes in neuronal and metabolic cell functions. So far, however, no distinct signalling pathway affected by the exposure or even a biomarker has been identified, which makes it difficult to draw conclusions with regard to human health.

Based on recent data mainly from *in vitro* studies on genotoxicity, effects of MMW on carcinogenesis are unlikely. However, only one animal study with considerable shortcomings in the study quality has been published, which investigated tumours of the subcutaneous tissue.

There are indications of impairment of reproduction after chronic exposure to 9.4 GHz MMW from a multi-generation study with nematodes, which is probably attributable to oxidative stress. However, studies on mammals are lacking.

Overall, a large number of the published studies have substantial limitations, particularly concerning exposure characterisation and dosimetry, and their results do not allow any conclusions regarding causality and health impact. Also, a reliable dose-response relationship can hardly be derived based on the available studies with frequent limitations. A statement on dose-dependency of effects cannot be made as there is a lack of such studies, and comparable experimental designs and endpoints have rarely been assessed.

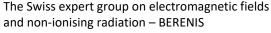


BERENIS statement on the state of knowledge, ICNIRP guidelines and precautionary measures

- It remains difficult to draw conclusions on potential health effects of RF-EMF exposure in the MMW range after the systematic evaluation of the publications of the past five years. The current knowledge is still ambivalent and the confidence in the available evidence is limited. Many studies are afflicted with uncertainties and, especially if the exposure levels were above the regulatory limits, a contribution of thermal effects to the findings often cannot be ruled out.
- Even though no health effects have been demonstrated below the ICNIRP reference limits [61], some uncertainties remain. There is moderate evidence that RF-EMF exposure above 5.8 GHz affects learning performance, which may be associated with oxidative and cellular stress. However, no epidemiological studies (>5.8 GHz) are available, therefore, the relevance for human health cannot be assessed conclusively. As already stated in the special newsletter issue from July 2020, BERENIS supports the consideration of the more precise guidelines for short-term and small-area exposures above 6 GHz by Swiss legislation before such frequencies will be implemented for mobile communications in the future.
- In view of these uncertainties, BERENIS continues to recommend consequent application of the precautionary principle. In Switzerland, the precautionary principle for emissions from stationary transmitters (e.g., mobile phone base stations and radio transmitters) is specified by the "installation limit value" in the Ordinance on Protection against Non-Ionising Radiation (NISV).
- With regard to the planned utilisation of the frequency range above 5.8 GHz in new communication technologies, we note that there are currently only few scientific studies with decent quality and reliable evidence. In particular, there is a lack of informative studies on mammals. It is therefore difficult to draw conclusions on potential health effects, especially for skin and eyes being the most exposed tissues. It is also not possible to make any firm statement on ecological consequences of MMW, as studies with small animals such as bees and other insects are mostly not available. To reduce the knowledge gaps, high-quality research should be initiated and promoted, to better assess the impact on health and the environment in the future.

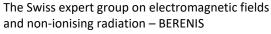
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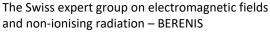


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Newsletter - Special Issue May 2025

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