

## Are you sleeping with the enemy?

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Judith Woods

*Can't get a good night's sleep? Electric devices left on in your bedroom could be to blame – and may be a health risk.*

You've cut out caffeine, you've reduced your alcohol consumption and the temperature of your heating in your bedroom, and you've scented your pillow with lavender oil, but are you any nearer to getting a good night's rest? No. Tossing and turning, each night you periodically reach through the dark to your mobile phone to check the time, to open the odd 2am text, or to program in a reminder note for the coming day. Stop right there – the cause of your sleep problem could be staring you in the face.

So many of us mobiles as alarm clocks, and leave them close to us at night, but by doing so we may be sleeping with the enemy. Did you know that even when not in use, or if being recharged, mobiles automatically send out signals to a local base station every ten minutes or so, giving off radiation in the process? Wi-fi systems left on at night have also been blamed for the rising levels of electronic smog that surrounds us while we snooze, which some experts warn is a silent, invisible health hazard.

While the mobile is no stranger to bad press, new research has shown that using the phone before bed can cause insomnia and headaches and cut the time spent in deep sleep. A study by scientists at the Karolinska Institute in Sweden has revealed that radiation generated by handsets causes people to take longer to reach those important deeper stages of sleep and, crucially, to spend less time in them.

“There is more than sufficient evidence that mobile phone exposure an hour before going to bed adversely affects deep sleep,” says Dr Chris Idzikowski, director of the Edinburgh Sleep Centre. “There are five distinct periods of sleep, and we think deep sleep is the one that provides the basic biological function of recovery and recuperation, so it's essential we maximise it.” Easily said, though, given the fact that one in three of us will suffer from insomnia at some point in our lives. But the exhausted, fuzzy feeling after a disturbed night is just the tip of the insomnia iceberg - lack of sleep also suppresses the immune system and, in the long term, can result in depression. Children and teenagers – who are most likely to use mobiles late at night – are also prone to suffer from poor academic achievement as a result.

Conventional medicine in the UK tends to reject ‘electrosensitivity’, namely that people can have a pronounced reaction to radiation, including insomnia and pain. But complementary therapists believe it exists.

Pippa, 37, who couldn't sleep while away on business, consulted a naturopath who suggested she stop using her mobile to make evening calls to her fiancé. “I now use a landline. I thought the idea that the phone was the problem was a bit mad, but I was amazed how much better I slept when I tried it.”

“I have been urging people to keep electronic gadgets out of their bedroom for 20 years,” says Brighton-based holistic GP Dr Milind Jani. “Brain function is based on electrical activity, so it would be daft not to think that electromagnetic waves from mobiles and computers don't affect us. Just because you can't see the repercussions immediately doesn't mean there isn't a subtle effect.”

Sometimes the effect isn't so subtle. When Connie resently visited her brother in Australia, she found that long after the jet lag had worn off she slept very badly and woke during vivid dreams. Then she travelled inland for a few days and had no trouble sleeping. "When I went back to my brother's, the dreams came back," says Connie. "I was baffled, until I found out that all the connections for the wireless network were under my bed. It was scary to think of the effect it was having on me, and I turned them off for the last few days of my stay. I'm sure I slept better and I'm convinced the wi-fi was disturbing my sleep."

So what can you do to get a good night's sleep? According to Jessica Alexander of the Sleep Council, you need to send your brain signals that you're ready to rest, so following the same nightly routine is the best guarantee of deep sleep. Also avoid e-mailing, playing computer games or texting before bedtime.

The best way to find out if your mobile is causing your sleep problems is to turn it off, and be aware of other gadgets such as digital phones and baby monitors left active overnight. There is no evidence that TVs or radio alarms directly interrupt your sleep, though if buzzing or flashing they may prove an unhealthy distraction.

As Jessica says, "If you want to switch off, they've got to be switched off."