



Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development
LABOR STANDARDS AND SAFETY DIVISION

DOLWD / Labor Standards and Safety / Occupational Safety and Health / Physical Agent Data Sheets (PADS)

PHYSICAL AGENT DATA SHEET (PADS) - RADIO FREQUENCY/MICROWAVE RADIATION

Description

Radiofrequency and microwave radiation are both forms of energy called electromagnetic radiation. Sunshine contains three other forms of electromagnetic radiation: ultraviolet rays, infrared (heat) waves, and visible light waves.

These forms of energy are transmitted by waves. The distance between wave peaks is the "wavelength." The number of wave peaks passing a given point in one second is the "frequency."

Radiofrequency or radiowaves have a range of frequencies and wavelengths. Very High Frequency (VHF) radiowaves are used for TV and FM radio. Medium Frequency (MF) radiowaves are used for AM radio. Radiofrequency is used in heat sealers and glue driers.

Microwaves are actually just radiowaves of higher frequencies. Microwaves are used for radar and satellite communications, for telephone and TV transmissions, for microwave ovens, and for diathermy in medical clinics.

Electromagnetic radiation can interact with objects (or people) in three different ways. The energy waves can pass through an object without being changed, like light through a window. It can be reflected, like light off a mirror, or it can be absorbed and cause the object to heat up, like a sidewalk in the sun.

The health hazards of electromagnetic radiation are related only to the absorption of energy. The effects of absorbed energy depend on many different factors such as its wavelength and frequency, its intensity and duration. Different materials also absorb energy differently.

[^back to the top.](#)

Health Hazards

When microwaves or radiowaves are absorbed by body tissues, localized or spot heating can occur. The increased temperature can damage tissues, especially those with poor temperature control such as the lens of the eye.

Cataracts, clouding of the lens of the eye, may occur at the very high energy levels encountered close to radiating radar antennas. Heat damage to tissues is caused by high levels of exposure for short periods of time.

The health effects of low levels of exposure to radiowaves or microwaves for long periods of time are much harder to find and to prove. Some scientific studies show health effects from long-term, lowlevel exposure, other studies do not.

The following list includes health effects which some researchers suspect may be related to excessive radiofrequency/microwave exposure:

- Psychological changes, e.g., insomnia, irritability, mood swings,
- depression
- Headaches
- Nervous system abnormalities
- Hormonal changes
- Miscarriages and birth defects
- Male Infertility
- Altered immunity
- Leukemia

Of course, many of these health effects are relatively common, and most people having these problems have NOT had excessive exposure to radiofrequency/microwave radiation.

[^back to the top.](#)

Safety and Health Precautions

Employers who have people working around devices which produce radiofrequency/microwave radiation need to be sure that those devices are properly shielded to prevent leakage of radiation. Safety information regarding proper use and shielding of those devices can usually be obtained from owner/operators manuals, manufacturers, and the Alaska Department of Labor Occupational Safety and Health Section.

Radiofrequency sealers and heaters have been among the major sources of employee exposure to radiofrequency/microwave radiation. When these machines are used, employees should use mechanical or electrical devices that allow them to stay as far away from the source of radiation as possible.

Whenever possible, these sealers should be turned off when not being used. Maintenance and adjustment of this type of equipment should be performed only by trained technicians and only when the machines are turned off.

Warnings should be posted to keep everyone away from the source of radiation except for those workers who are absolutely essential to performing the job.

People who are regularly exposed to significant levels of radiofrequency/microwave radiation should have preemployment and annual physical exams. The doctors should pay careful attention to the eyes to look for cataracts, to the nervous system for any abnormalities to the blood, to detect any early evidence of leukemia, and to the reproductive system to detect any abnormalities. Information concerning the frequency and intensity of the radiation exposures and duration of exposures should be provided to the physician.

In work areas where there is known or suspected to be significant amounts of radiofrequency/microwave radiation present, specialists should measure the amounts of radiation present. If excessive radiofrequency/microwave radiation is detected, modifications in the workplace should be made to reduce radiation exposure of workers. Afterwards, additional measurements should be made to determine if the radiation exposure has been reduced.

[^back to the top.](#)

Permissible Exposure Limits

The State of Alaska's permissible exposure limit is specified in Article I of Subchapter 4, Occupational Health and Environmental Control Code [04.0106(a)], Alaska Occupational Safety and Health Standards. For normal environmental conditions and for incident electromagnetic energy of frequencies from 10 MHz to 100 GHz, the radiation protection guide is 10 mW/cm (milliwatts per square centimeter) as averaged over any possible six-minute period.

Further information can be obtained from the Alaska Department of Labor, Occupational Safety and Health Section.

Microwave Cooking Ovens

Microwave ovens used for heating food, when used in accordance with manufacturer's instructions, do not expose personnel to microwave radiation.

Microwave ovens do not need to be included in an employer's Hazard Communication program.



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