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Wired Over Wireless

Health Specialist Laura DiBattista examines why the concept of city-wide WiFi is making seem people sick.

For some people, it's the greatest thing since sliced bread – the chance to toast your ability to get on the Internet without being connected to a phone line or a cable modem.

It's called WiFi, a method that allows computer users to connect to the worldwide web via a signal sent through a building or a park or even their own home network.

It seems like a huge convenience to many and when the city of Toronto confirmed earlier this year it planned to make the entire downtown core a hot spot, most people responded with approval.

But not Maggie Kambanis.

She claims to be one of the two percent of Canadians who have a sensitivity to electromagnetic waves and she worries about what the extra signals flying through the air will do to her health.

"You get people maybe who are edgy," she relates. "Who are tired, who are not sleeping. They have no idea what it's caused by ... People don't realize that you can't see it, you can't smell it, you can't hear it."

Proponents of the plan point out there are already thousands of Blackberry, cell phone, walk-talkie signals and more flying invisibly through the air and that these very weak additions won't make much difference.

But to Kambanis, that's just the point.

"It's just one more thing," she complains. "It's like pesticide. They say, 'well this pesticide is fine', but they don't take into account that you may get 600 chemical hits a day on your body."

The city isn't insensitive to Maggie's sensitivity, undertaking a study to look at the effects of what some call 'electronic smog' on people's health before the switch is turned on.

"There have been studies that show potential cancer effects as well as impacts on the nervous system, sleep and so forth," agrees Ronald McFarlane of Toronto Public Health.

The report is due by the fall, but it's not likely to stop the project no matter what researchers find.

Instead, Kambanis has taken action, putting protecting devices on her cell phones,

her computer and other electronic gadgets around her home to try and fight the power she believes has been causing her health woes.

WiFi

What is it?

Like most things in computer speak, WiFi is a short form. It stands for Wireless Fidelity, a transmission system that, among other things, allows users to access the Internet without being hooked up to a phone line or a cable modem. It literally transmits your signal to and from your PC without wires, making laptops even more useful and more portable.

What is Toronto doing about WiFi?

Toronto Hydro wants to use its power lines as a means to spread its signal across the entire downtown core, creating one huge hot spot for computer users.

In theory, it means they would be able to instantly access the Internet wherever they are.

There are already hundreds of connective places in cafes, stores and homes across the G.T.A. and more are coming online every day.

What are the worries?

Like anything else wirelessly electronic, in order to get that signal to your machine, they have to transmit it through the air via radio frequencies.

Some believe those transmissions can harm people sensitive to such electric waves and create health hazards for even the most unsuspecting Canadian – even if they've never used a computer in their lives.

The alarm was first raised after scientific studies claimed the radiation put out by cell phones created the possibility of forming serious brain tumours in people who continually held the wireless devices up to their ears.

The scientific world has been at war over the issue ever since, and for every study that purports to find them a health hazard comes another that rates them relatively benign.

Some parents worry that exposing their kids to unseen and unknown extra radio frequencies could result in future health problems. They cite everything from DNA damage to gene alternations.

But Health Canada has examined the WiFi idea and doesn't think that will happen. It's studied the issue since 2000 and found no negative effects from exposure to the frequencies.

But like those who refuse to live near giant hydro towers, others aren't so sure that

what they can't see won't hurt them, and don't want to put their family's well being at risk for a project they don't consider an essential service.

Is WiFi banned anywhere in Ontario?

Yes. Lakehead University in Thunder Bay famously decided to switch off some of its wireless Internet access points earlier this year after officials there read some California studies questioning the safety of the transmissions.

What is Toronto doing?

The city's Medical Officer of Health, Dr. David McKeown, is undertaking a study on the effects of wireless across Toronto. It could be ready by fall.

What do the critics say?

Those who support WiFi argue the radiation from the process is so negligible it's almost not worth trying to read it. They contend there's more emissions from cell and cordless phones, microwave ovens, baby monitors and even garage door openers – and no one's suggesting they be banned or restricted.

Where are the current WiFi spots in Toronto?

There are lots of them, especially in coffee shops. Among the most prominent on other venues:

Air Canada Centre

First Canadian Place

Royal Bank Plaza & Office Tower

Mount Sinai Hospital

The Royal York Hotel

Parts of Pearson International Airport

Parts of Union Station

Yonge-Sheppard Centre

Bio

OCCUPATION:

Anchor, "*CityNews at Noon*"
Health Specialist, "*CityNews*"



SHOW DESCRIPTION:

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BACKGROUND:

Born in Toronto, Laura is a life-long resident of Toronto's "Beaches." Upon graduating from Ryerson University, Laura joined **Citytv** in 1983, initially in newsroom operations. In 1985, she moved to the writing desk---editing and scripting local/international stories for anchor presentation.

As is often the case at **Citytv**, Laura was soon drafted for on-camera work; first as a "*CityNews*" reporter; then in 1988, as anchor of "*CityNews Weekend.*"

Laura joined "*CityNews at Noon*" in 1995 and took over as anchor in 1997. She spent two years as host of "*CityLive at Five*" in 1998 before returning to "*CityNews at Noon.*" Laura continues to report on a regular basis for "*CityNews*" as Health Specialist.

EDUCATION:

Radio/Television Arts program at Ryerson University

EXTRACURRICULAR:

Toronto Firefighters Golden Helmet Award for her coverage of the fire at St. Paul's Church on Avenue Road.

FAVES:

You'll always find Laura with a book. Her other interests include: travel (as many times as possible to Italy!), gardening and running. Laura successfully juggles her family life (daughter & husband) with the many demands of her busy career.