

Mobile phones are now covered by the European Union Nickel Directive

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Nickel allergy is common and affects up to 17% women and 3% men (1). Contact sensitization is mainly caused by repeated or continuous skin contact to consumer products that release an excessive amount of nickel (2–5). In 1990, the Danish Ministry of Environment prohibited consumer products that were intended for direct and prolonged skin contact (e.g. jewellery, zippers, spectacle frames, and buttons) and at the same time released more than 0.5 µg nickel/cm²/week (6). This exposure limit was mainly established through experimental clinical exposure studies performed at the time (4, 7). In 1994, the EU also regulated nickel exposure as the Nickel Directive was introduced in the Member States (8, 9). So far, two reports have shown that the prevalence of nickel allergy has decreased among dermatitis patients following the regulations on nickel (10, 11).

In recent years, the use of metallic mobile phones has increased among European consumers (12). This led to several reports that described facial nickel dermatitis following skin contact with mobile phones (12–15).

A Danish study showed that 8 of 41 (19.5%) mobile phones from two international mobile phone companies released an excessive amount of nickel as assessed by the dimethylglyoxime test (12). Similarly, a Canadian study showed that 4 of 22 (18.2%) mobile phones released more than 0.5 µg nickel/cm²/week and furthermore that several headsets had parts that released nickel (13). In Denmark, most national newspapers reported the Danish mobile phone study in January 2008. However, in October 2008, the nickel story also reached national television (the Danish Broadcasting Corporation) as an evening programme about mobile phone dermatitis was broadcast. The TV station performed their own investigation for this programme and found that 13 of 50 (26%) mobile phones released more than 0.5 µg nickel/cm²/week (<http://www.dr.dk/DR1/kontant/2008/10/14152657.htm>). They included eight different mobile phone brands and found (like previous studies) that the nickel problem affected most of them. In January 2009, the Danish Minister of Environment (Mr Troels Lund Poulsen) officially suggested that mobile phones should be covered by the EU Nickel Directive. The European Commission agreed to this shortly after. This story shows that the political system can react quickly and that it may be ready to take efficient steps to protect public health when necessary.

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