Any health care facilities ban cell phones in patient care areas because of concerns about interference with medical equipment. A new study suggests clinicians’ use of cell phones instead of pagers could actually improve patient safety.

Researchers distributed a questionnaire to all attendees of the 2003 American Society of Anesthesiologists conference. The survey asked what mode of communication anesthesiologists used in the OR and ICU, whether they had experienced any significant delays in communication, and whether they had observed an error or injury because of delayed communication. The survey also asked if respondents’ facilities allowed cell phone use in the OR and ICU and if they had ever observed interference between the cell phone and a medical device. In all, 4,018 surveys were returned, a 51% response rate.

**Interference was rare**

The results showed:

- 65% used pagers as their primary means of communication, while 17% used mobile phones.
- Overall, users of cell phones reported a decreased risk of error or injury compared with pager users.
- Interference from cell phones was rare, reported by 2.4%.

Interestingly, 49% of those who used cell phones said their facility did not allow them.

The authors thought the most likely reason for the lower error risk with cell phones was that information could be relayed more quickly. In contrast, those who rely on pagers must wait for a page to be answered.

Interference was rare probably partly because cell phone technology has improved to use very low levels of energy. In addition, newer medical devices are shielded against interference, and modern telemetry equipment operates on a different frequency than wireless devices like cell phones, the authors note.

In another study published last fall, researchers at the Mayo Clinic tested 6 types of cell phones with 16 different medical devices and found the phones did not interfere with equipment that was more than 3 feet away. Though 44% of the devices recorded some interference, the vast majority “should not have any significance for the patient,” the researchers said. This was an improvement over earlier tests. The authors said cell phones will need to be tested periodically for their effects.

**References**
