

Wi-fi faces health concerns  
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The mobile telephone industry spent many years - and millions of dollars - fighting charges that wireless handsets could cause brain cancer. Now it looks like the budding wi-fi movement could face its own legal crisis with lawsuits alleging that 802.11 networks can cause similar physical problems.

**A few families in the Chicago suburb of Oak Park, Illinois, have filed a class-action lawsuit against Oak Park Elementary School's District 97. They assert that wireless local-area networks (WLAN) in the school buildings expose their children to potential harm.** Their suit points to a "substantial body of evidence that high frequency electro-magnetic radiation poses substantial and serious health risks, particularly to growing children." The suit does not seek financial damages, but an end to the use of wi-fi in the neighborhood's schools.

The Wi-Fi Alliance, an industry group with members including Intel, Microsoft, Philips, and IBM, is aware of the suit, and says it will continue to pay attention to developments. "It's natural when you hear about litigation for people to take notice," says Alliance chairman Dennis Eaton. "Members are sensitive to the amount of time and effort that might have to be spent defending themselves."

The small suit could have big ramifications, particularly with wi-fi vendors. Global sales of 802.11 networks reached almost \$1.3 billion through the first three quarters of this year, according to market research firm Dell'Oro Group. Tens of millions of people use the technology now, and the company predicts that the number will grow to 707 million by 2008, says Pyramid Research.

Furthermore, as public hotspots invade hotels, airports, and coffee shops, an enormous number of people could claim to be adversely and unknowingly affected by WLANs. That is a key point of the lawsuit. "We have not established a level that can be considered safe or even tolerably safe," says Ron Baiman, one of the parents who filed the lawsuit. "Our thinking is that it is certainly prudent at this point not to use these in public schools."