

# 5G has no link to COVID-19 but false conspiracy theories persist

cnet.com (<https://www.cnet.com/tech/mobile/5g-has-no-link-to-covid-19-as-false-conspiracy-theories-persist/>)

As the coronavirus swept across the globe, so did rumors about what caused it and how it's spread. One that's persisted online is that 5G networks caused the disease. A new one involves vaccines somehow being linked to 5G tracking. Both are completely wrong. Radio waves can't create a virus, which is what causes COVID-19. And if someone wanted to track you, your phone is a more likely culprit than radio transmitters that are entirely too large to fit into a syringe.

But that hasn't stopped threats against broadband engineers (<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/apr/03/broadband-engineers-threatened-due-to-5g-coronavirus-conspiracies>) and possible arson attacks against UK phone towers (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/apr/04/uk-phone-masts-attacked-amid-5g-coronavirus-conspiracy-theory>), prompting UK carriers to ask people to stop burning the towers (<https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/6/21209363/uk-5g-towers-burning-coronavirus-conspiracy-theory-arson-attacks-carrier-response>) and the UK's national medical director to call out the 5G conspiracy theory as "complete and utter rubbish." (<https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-health-coronavirus-britain-5g-idUKKBN21M0ME>) The US Department of Homeland Security issued a warning last year about the potential threat to wireless equipment (<https://www.cnet.com/tech/services-and-software/fake-5g-coronavirus-theories-have-real-world-consequences/>). Communications networks are crucial in the fight against the pandemic.

The COVID-19 conspiracy theory has spread on social media. Keri Hilson, an American singer with 4.2 million followers on Twitter, sent several tweets in April 2020 that attempted to link the coronavirus to 5G. She wrote: "People have been trying to warn us about 5G for YEARS. Petitions, organizations, studies...what we're going thru is the affects [sic] of radiation. 5G launched in CHINA. Nov 1, 2019. People dropped dead."

That same month, actor Woody Harrelson became the latest celebrity to falsely connect 5G to the coronavirus. He shared an article in an Instagram post, saying that while he hasn't "fully vetted" rumors linking 5G to the pandemic sweeping the globe, "I find it very interesting."

Others on YouTube and Facebook, including an anti-5G Facebook group, have also shared false claims. But YouTube that month said it would remove 5G-coronavirus hoax videos (<https://www.cnet.com/tech/mobile/youtube-bans-coronavirus-covid19-5g-conspiracy-videos/>), implementing a ban one day after stopping just short of that. Twitter has started labeling tweets containing the hoax and adding links to legitimate sources of information (but it's had some trouble (<https://www.cnet.com/tech/mobile/more-harm-than-good-twitter-struggles-to-label-misleading-covid-19-tweets/>)).

"We're committed to providing timely and helpful information at this critical time, including raising authoritative content, reducing the spread of harmful misinformation and showing information panels, using NHS and WHO data, to help combat misinformation," YouTube said in a statement. "Now any content that disputes the existence or transmission of COVID-19, as described by the WHO and local health authorities, is in violation of YouTube policies. This includes conspiracy theories which claim that the symptoms are caused by 5G."

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Facebook also said it's removing posts inaccurately connecting 5G to the coronavirus.

"We are taking aggressive steps to stop misinformation and harmful content from spreading on our platforms and connect people to accurate information about coronavirus," the company said in a statement. "Under our existing policies against harmful misinformation, we are starting to remove false claims which link COVID-19 to 5G technology and could lead to physical harm."

In March 2020, a Facebook user named Ben Mackie falsely linked 5G to the coronavirus, saying in part that it's not actually a virus. "They are trying to get u scared of a fake ass virus when it the 5G towers being built around the world," he said. He also claimed that Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates invented the technology and that it's an effort to depopulate the world. And Mackie said that vaccines being developed for the coronavirus are actually chips that will be implanted in people.

*(Editors' note: We are not linking to these posts because they contain falsehoods.)*

Those claims were debunked by UK fact-checker FullFact (<https://fullfact.org/online/coronavirus-5G/>), and other experts have chimed in.

"This story about 5G has no credence scientifically and is certainly a potential distraction, as is other such misinformation, from controlling the COVID-19 epidemic," said Dr. Jonathan M. Samet, (<http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/colleges/PublicHealth/About/WhoWeAre/Leadership/OfficeoftheDean/Pages/deanbiography.aspx>) dean of the Colorado School of Public Health.

Brendan Carr, who serves on the Federal Communications Commission, tweeted that Hilson's effort to link 5G to the coronavirus "is straight from the most dangerous depths of tin foil hat land." He noted that COVID-19 is caused by a virus that's spread by person-to-person contact, not by radio waves, and he reiterated that the FCC, Food and Drug Administration, and Environmental Protection Agency all say 5G is safe.

5G is the new, super-fast wireless technology that's been rolling out across the globe. In the US, 5G networks are available nationwide. 5G is also live in a number of other countries, such as China, South Korea, Germany and the UK. The technology is poised to change the way we live and is expected to power everything from self-driving cars (<https://www.cnet.com/roadshow/self-driving-cars/>) to advanced augmented reality experiences. The belief is that whatever country leads in 5G will lead the world over the coming decades and possibly longer.

## **5G health concerns?**

But ever since companies first started talking about 5G, there have been concerns expressed by some people about the technology's impact on health (<https://www.cnet.com/tech/mobile/5g-is-coming-but-not-everyone-is-happy-about-it/>). One version of 5G, called millimeter wave, runs on very high-frequency radio waves. Those signals can't travel long distances, which requires towers to be placed close together and installed in more locations. That has reignited worries that the radio waves could produce harmful radiation that could cause brain cancer, reduced fertility, headaches and other illnesses.

The FDA and FCC say there's nothing to worry about because studies haven't found a link between radio frequency signals from cellphones or cell towers and disease. But because 5G is so new, there's no definitive way to know if it will cause long-term health problems (<https://www.cnet.com/tech/mobile/5g-phones-and-your-health-what-you-need-to-know/>).

What can be definitively stated is that 5G doesn't cause or spread a virus.

"It's a ridiculous concept," said John Bucher, a senior scientist with the National Toxicology Program, a US Health and Human Services interagency program dedicated to testing and evaluating substances in our environment. "Each year, you get a new strain of flu that goes around. That's what viruses do -- mutate and move around that way, probably as long as there's been life."

## Coronavirus updates

A coronavirus is a type of virus that's spread from person-to-person contact. It doesn't travel through something like radio waves. You can't get it from using your phone or watching TV -- unless the phone itself or the remote control is contaminated with coronavirus. This novel coronavirus belongs to the Coronaviridae family. They look like spiked rings when viewed under an electron microscope (<https://www.cnet.com/science/this-is-what-the-deadly-coronavirus-looks-like-under-a-microscope/>) and are named for these spikes, which form a halo or "crown" (corona is Latin for "crown") around their viral envelope.

The coronavirus (<https://www.cnet.com/news/coronavirus-explained-symptoms-lockdowns-and-all-your-covid-19-questions-answered/>) was first detected in the Chinese city of Wuhan late last year. The virus (<https://www.cbsnews.com/live-updates/china-coronavirus-outbreak-us-plans-wuhan-evacuation-death-toll-number-cases-rises-today-2020-01-28/>), initially known as 2019-nCoV, was reported to the World Health Organization on Dec. 31 and has been under investigation since. Other coronaviruses include SARS and MERS. In mid-March, the World Health Organization labeled the coronavirus outbreak a pandemic (<https://www.cnet.com/science/who-declares-coronavirus-outbreak-a-pandemic/>), and the virus' spread has caused countries around the world, including the US, to take drastic measures like lockdowns.

One point addressed by the 5G-coronavirus theories is that COVID-19 came from China because that's where most 5G network towers are. While China does have service in many areas, 5G came to South Korea and parts of the US first. The US hasn't seen major numbers of coronavirus until the past couple of weeks. COVID-19 also has spread to areas without 5G, like Iran and Japan.

"There appears to be no dispute that animals are the source of the coronavirus, according to experts like the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control," said CTIA, the wireless industry trade association, said.

This isn't the first time that 5G has been a target (<https://www.cnet.com/tags/target/>) of conspiracy theories. Russia, which has sown misinformation and influenced the 2016 US presidential election, has included 5G as one of its target areas. Broadcaster RT America, which is funded by the Russian government, a year ago published a report called "5G Wireless: A Dangerous 'Experiment on Humanity'" that sought to create fear about the technology. The New York Times at the time said it was an effort by Russia to slow the US push for 5G (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/12/science/5g-phone-safety-health-russia.html>).

*CNET's Maggie Reardon, Richard Nieva and Queenie Wong contributed to this report.*

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