It’s your constant companion. It’s in your pocket, in your bag, in your hands, or against your head. You use it at home, in class, at the gym, in coffee shops, before you go to sleep at night and first thing when you wake up in the morning. I’m talking, of course, about your cell phone. According to my class survey, everyone in this room has a cell phone, and all of us use it dozens of times every day.

But what if your constant companion is dangerous? What if it’s hazardous to your health? Evidence is piling up that long-term use of cell phones can lead to tissue damage, tumors, and even brain cancer. Given that well over 4 billion people worldwide use cell phones, we’re looking at a problem of potentially staggering magnitude. According to Devra Davis, epidemiologist and author of the 2010 book *Disconnect: The Truth About Cell Phone Radiation*, we may be watching “an epidemic in slow motion.”

I’d never thought much about the possible perils of cell phones before I saw a CBS News report on the subject earlier this year. But doing extensive research for this speech made me realize that cell phones do in fact pose a danger to our health.

Now, don’t worry, I’m not going to try to persuade you to abandon your constant companion. I still use mine on a regular basis, and I probably always will. But I do hope to persuade you to make one simple change in the way you use your cell phone—a change that will protect your health and could even make the difference between a long life and premature death. But first, let’s look more closely at the health risks posed by cell phones.

Those risks stem from the fact that cell phones emit small amounts of radiation that, over time, can damage tissue. Every time you use your cell phone, you expose yourself to that radiation. The amount is miniscule in comparison to that given off by x-ray machines—about one one-billionth of the intensity. However, Dr. Ronald Herberman of the University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute explains that the problem with cell phone radiation is not how much is emitted at a single time, but how much we are exposed to with repeated use day after day, year after year.

It’s this long-term use of cell phones that has led researchers to warn about their danger. In one study, for example, the World Health Organization tracked 10,000 cell phone users over the course of 10 years. As reported in *The New York Times* on November 13, 2010, the data in this study indicated that “subjects who used a cellphone 10 or more years doubled the risk of developing” brain tumors. Other studies have reached the same conclusion. Perhaps most important is a 2007 study in the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine* that surveyed all the previous research on cell phone use. It found “a consistent pattern of increased risk” for brain tumors among people who used cell phones for more than 10 years.

Alan Marks is one of those people. A 58-year-old real-estate developer and father of three, he talked on his cell phone an hour a day for 23 years. Two years ago, doctors found a golf-ball-sized tumor in his brain. “There’s no
question what caused it,” Marks told CBS News in March 2010. “It was my cell phone.”

And Alan Marks isn’t the only person to conclude that he’s sick because of his cell phone. Ann Gittleman’s 2010 book Zapped, which deals at length with the health problems of cell phones, catalogues people who developed blinding headaches, dizziness, circulatory problems, nausea, and cancer from the kind of radiation emitted by cell phones.

Still not convinced about the potential dangers posed by your constant companion? Take a look, then, inside the thick manual that comes with your phone. Read the fine print. You’ll see that all cell phone manufacturers warn against keeping your phone right next to your body. Apple, for example, recommends keeping the iPhone five-eighths of an inch away from your body. Makers of the Blackberry recommend that you keep their phone a full inch away. Cell phone manufacturers don’t publicize this information widely, but they clearly recognize that their products are potentially hazardous.

So what’s the solution? As I stated earlier, it’s not to stop using cell phones altogether. I can’t imagine being without mine, and I’m sure you can’t imagine being without yours.

You can, however, take seriously the risks of cell phones and find a way to minimize those risks. Time and again, experts point out that the single most effective way to reduce the risk is not to press your cell phone against your head while using it. Since the phone emits radiation, the closer you put it to your head, the more radiation you expose yourself to.

At the very least, you should hold the phone one-half an inch to one full inch away from your ear. But ideally, you should get in the habit of not holding it up to your ear at all. I now use my earbuds and microphone almost every time I use my phone. Another option is to use your speaker phone.

As with breaking any habit, changing the way you talk on your cell phone may be slightly inconvenient at first, but soon it will become second nature. You will be able to enjoy all the benefits of your constant companion without suffering the fate of Alan Marks. If Marks had known the dangers of prolonged cell phone use, he would have done things a lot differently. “I wouldn’t have held it to my head,” he says. “I would have used the speaker phone. I would have used the headset. . . . And I would not have had the problems I had.”

So, please, get in the habit of keeping your cell phone away from your ear when talking, and encourage your friends and family to do the same. Start today, with your next phone call, and continue every day in the future. We can avoid the slow-motion epidemic that doctors and scientists are warning us about—as long as we remember to keep this away from this.