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Kids, don't let pandemic weigh you down

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Doctors worry as shut schools, curbs on playgrounds and hours in front of screens are making children gain weight and vulnerable to Covid complications

MUMBAI: With schools shut, restrictions on playgrounds and hours spent in front of screens, children are gaining weight, which, according to doctors, is a worrying trend and could contribute to Covid-19 complications in paediatric patients. In the second wave, children with obesity or high body mass index needed more clinical attention.

Dr Ramesh Bharmal, dean of BYL Nair Hospital, said almost 30-40% of paediatric patients with Covid-19 infection who were treated in intensive care units (ICU) or ventilators at the hospital in April were overweight.

"During the peak of the pandemic, we got several paediatric patients who were overweight or obese. Due to their underlying health issues, they take longer time to recover than others," she said.

Similarly, Dr Tushar Parikh, pediatrician from Motherhood Hospital, said, "Such children tend to develop more complications like acute pneumonia which requires treatment in the ICU."

Hospitals like Nanavai Max Super Speciality Hospital, Bombay Hospital have witnessed a rise in the number of children suffering from obesity-related cardiac, respiratory and diabetes complications.

"Children can't go to school, or play outside due to the Covid-19 safety restrictions. It is affecting their mental health also which often makes them irritable and aggressive. This also leads to overeating and consumption of junk foods," said Dr Harish Shetty, a city-based psychiatrist.

Dr Parikh claimed that obese children with mild Covid-19 infection can turn severe.

"An obese child is prone to early onset of heart problems and diabetes, which brings down the immunity. So they become more vulnerable to Covid-19. Even after contracting the infection, their underlying health condition can contribute to further worsening of their infection."

Health experts say the lockdown has negatively impacted sleep, eating habits and physical activity among children. In fact, doctors are getting children as young as two years old who are gaining weight due to the sedentary lifestyle.

"In children, obesity can lead to a metabolic syndrome (a cluster of conditions that increase the risk of heart disease, stroke and diabetes), which can be a serious problem in

adolescence," said Dr Subhash Rao, senior paediatrician, Fortis Hiranandani Hospital, Vashi.

According to a study, 'Obesity as a risk factor for severe illness from Covid-19 in the paediatric population', obesity leads to persistent immune dysregulation and is associated with increased susceptibility to infections that lead to sepsis and death. It has been postulated that chronic inflammation-hypercytokinemia, endothelial dysfunction, cardiac abnormalities, and prothrombotic environment are possible mechanisms through which obesity leads to worse Covid-19 outcomes.

The study has been conducted by Ascension Sacred Heart, University of Florida, Pensacola, USA.

In the conclusion, the study read: "With increasing pediatric infections due to Covid-19, risk factors for disease severity are becoming evident with obesity prevailing as a major risk for the pediatric population." "Children with obesity need better observation and the treating doctors should be more careful," said Dr Bakul Parekh, past president of the Indian Academy of Paediatrics (IAP) and part of the paediatric Covid task force.

Dr Rao suggested that the children eat a healthy diet that will ensure they get all micronutrients, vitamins and the right number of calories to build their immunity.

"Also, ensure at least one hour of physical activity in the form of exercises at home, dancing, using stairs instead of lift among others. Limit the consumption of "JUNCS" food i.e. (junk foods, ultra-processed foods, nutritionally inappropriate foods, caffeinated/colored/carbonated food/ beverages, sugar-sweetened beverages)," he said.