- Virus

Kids at risk of Covid, but won't be 'main target' of third wave

Serosurveys show large number of children tested positive for the coronavirus in the first wave also, but most didn't become sick

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Early in the pandemic it was thought that Covid-19 does not affect children, but now many experts fear the third wave will affect children in large numbers. Monday's news of 10,000 children and teenagers testing positive for Covid in Ahmednagar in May has only made parents more anxious. State and civic administrations are drawing up protocols for managing a rush of paediatric patients. In Mumbai, for instance, many of the field or 'jumbo' hospitals are in the process of setting up 250-bed child wards.

'Kids, Adults At Equal Risk'

Paediatricians, however, are more worried about the "hype" than the actual third wave. A senior government doctor said the scare over paediatric cases rising during the third wave is the result of administrators and hospitals not "wanting to be caught napping".

A statement put out by the Indian Academy of Pediatrics (IAP) last week said it was "highly unlikely that the third wave will predominantly or exclusively affect children". If there is a massive increase in the overall number of Covid-19 patients, there is a possibility that paediatric cases too would go up accordingly.

Dr Tanu Singhal, a paediatric infectious diseases specialist from Mumbai, said children are as much at risk from Covid-19 as adults. She cited the second serological survey of Delhi from August 2020 that showed 34.7% of children aged 5-17 had been exposed to SARS-CoV-2. A survey by a diagnostic company also found a quarter of children aged 10-17 in many cities had antibodies to Covid-19. Yet, most children had been asymptomatic.

Children and teenagers make up around 10% of the patients, according to the Maharashtra government's Covid update. Of Maharashtra's 57 lakh cases since March 2020, 5.8 lakh were in the 0-20 age group. A senior paediatrician in a government hospital said children are mostly tested because they are "high-risk contacts" of existing patients and not because they exhibit symptoms.

'Most Children Only Need Home Care'

"The point is 99% of the children recover from Covid-19 at home," said Dr Singhal. In Mumbai's Kokilaben

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Hospital, where she is a full-time specialist, there have been only two under-18 admissions with pneumonia in the last three months.

Dr Parmanand Andankar, chief paediatric intensivist at Thane's Jupiter Hospital and a member of Maharashtra's paediatric task force, said, "If 10,000 children in Ahmednagar suffered from Covid-19, it is

a statement about their positive status. The majority were not critical or in need of hospitalisation."

Real Worry For Kids

Doctors across the world have treated a small number of children and teenagers who develop a rare inflammatory condition roughly four weeks after having Covid-19. In a small number of cases, this 'paediatric inflammatory multisystem syndrome (PIMS)' can affect the heart and turn serious. The point is to recognise the red eyes or rash as a possibility of PIMS and rush for medical help.

Dr Andankar believes PIMS should be a bigger public health concern than Covid-19 among children. "There would be more children with PIMS needing hospitalisation than those with Covid-19,'' he said.

After the first wave in June 2020, when PIMS was not a widely accepted theory, a few children brought to Mumbai's hospitals with severe inflammation and vasculitis (inflamed blood vessels) lost their lives. They were Covid-19 negative when admitted but had antibodies indicating prior exposure to the virus. They came in with fever, stomach ache, vomiting, rash, swollen feet and lymph nodes – symptoms mimicking Kawasaki Disease in which inflammation is seen in blood vessels and heart function suffers drastically.

"When active Covid-19 cases in a city or community come down, the incidence of PIMS rises. Unfortunately, it is not notifiable and hence not reported,'' said Dr Andankar.

As the second wave has declined in Mumbai and its neighbouring cities, doctors here have started noticing an increase in PIMS cases. There is a child needing admission every second day, or a handful with mild PIMS needing out-patient treatment. In Whatsapp groups of paediatricians, cases are being reported from rural Maharashtra as well.

PIMS could be missed because many monsoon diseases like dengue also cause fever, rash and redness in the eyes. In rural areas, the severe cases could be missed because there is no equipment to check for coronary involvement in children.

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Treatable, But Expensive Care

The good news about Covid and PIMS among children is that they are easy to treat. Children with PIMS need steroids – at much higher doses than administered to adults with Covid – or intravenous immunoglobulins (naturally produced antibodies that help fight infections). "Unfortunately, IV immunoglobulins are expensive as the dose depends on the child's weight. In some children, the cost of one such IV could be over Rs 1 lakh,'' said a senior government doctor.