- Children—diseases

How parents can cut kids' screen time, avoid illness

DOCTORS SHARE TIPS TO BUILD HEALTHY ROUTINES AND BOOST IMMUNITY

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As students across the UAE return to classrooms, parents are once again navigating familiar challenges, from limiting screen time at home to protecting children from seasonal illnesses.



With changing temperatures, increased activities, and close contact among classmates, experts have noted that simple daily habits can make a significant difference.

Dr Sameh Ali, specialist paediatrician and neonatologist at Medcare Shaikh Saqr Al Qasimi Hospital in Sharjah, emphasised the importance of structuring children's time after school to reduce reliance on screens.

"After school, children benefit most from activities that allow them to move, create, and interact with others. Outdoor play, cycling, swimming, football, dance, martial arts, or simply a family walk can help improve fitness, sleep, and concentration," Ali told Gulf News.

Given some restrictions, he has shared that other "excellent alternatives" to screens are creative options which include drawing, painting, building with blocks, puzzles, reading, baking, or music. Likewise, activities such as board games, gardening, helping with simple household tasks, or joining clubs and sports teams can also strengthen social and emotional skills.

"Interacting face-to-face with family and friends supports confidence, communication, and overall wellbeing. Even setting aside one or two screen-free hours each evening can make a noticeable difference to a child's mood, sleep, and development."

Ali said changing weather and temperatures, from cooler mornings to warmer afternoons, together with dust and humidity, can increase children's vulnerability to infections and allergies.

"Children should have enough sleep, drink plenty of water, eat balanced meals rich in fruit and vegetables, and stay physically active," said Ali.

Basic hygiene habits are equally important. Children should wash their hands frequently with soap and water, avoid touching their face, and cover coughs and sneezes. Sharing food, drinking bottles, or any personal items should be discouraged.

"If a child is unwell, it is best to keep them at home until they are feeling better and and are fever free."

According to Dr Kejal Merani, specialist paediatrician at Aster Clinic, the most common illnesses during the school term are upper respiratory tract infections, viral and bacterial throat infections, stomach bugs, and conjunctivitis.

"Returning to school is such a positive milestone for children, and with a little awareness, parents can make sure it stays that way. The most effective thing any family can do is make hand hygiene a consistent habit," stated Merani.

She stressed the importance of ensuring vaccinations are up to date as per the UAE's national immunisation schedule to add another strong layer of protection.

Meanwhile, Ali said that parents should watch for symptoms like fever, persistent cough, sore throat, runny nose, vomiting, diarrhoea, rash, or unusual tiredness.

While most cases are mild and improve with rest and fluids, medical advice should be sought if symptoms worsen, especially in cases of breathing difficulty, high fever, or dehydration.

Similarly, Dr Puneet Wadhwa, consultant paediatrician at Prime Hospital, highlighted ways in which parents can support their children's overall health.

"Children who are especially sensitive or allergic to certain conditions need to be more careful and dressed properly. Also, there is a role of balanced diet, proper hydration, and adequate sleep, which are all important for overall immunity," explained Wadhwa.

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