

How smartphones are making your CHILD OBESE

The scene is familiar: A toddler is strapped into a high chair, a phone propped up with cartoons on loop. As the child giggles at the screen, spoonfuls of food slide in without fuss. For many parents and nannies, this trick feels like a lifesaver. But what begins as an easy fix soon snowballs — screens at every mealtime, snacks paired with endless reels, online gaming instead of outdoor play. In India, the silent epidemic of childhood obesity linked to smartphones is far more serious than most families realise.

Even kids as young as five are showing signs of weight gain, with smartphones being used as pacifiers during meals or study breaks, says Dr Vijay Yewale, head of paediatrics at Apollo Hospitals, Navi Mumbai. An August 2025 study on school-going children in Gujarat, published in the European Journal of Cardiovascular Medicine, showed that 43% of kids who had a screen time of more than 4 hours a day (less than 2 hours is recommended) were either overweight or obese, and took to emotional eating of high-sugar and high-fat snacks owing to boredom, stress and anxiety. Doctors say the 8-14 age group is most vulnerable.



Image created with AI for representation

months, he lost 3.5kg, his waist reduced by 4cm, and his fatty liver started improving.

Not Just A Pacifier

"The consequences of screens are clear — less outdoor play, reduced physical activity, and a growing trend of 'couch potato' lifestyles directly tied to childhood obesity," says Dr Asmita Mahajan, consultant neonatologist and paediatrician at SL Raheja Hospital — A Fortis Associate. In June, TOI had reported that in Rajkot, more than 8 out of 10 children under 10 needed a phone or tablet during meals.

Instead of focusing on their plate, they're watching cartoons or YouTube, missing out on the taste and aroma of food, which ultimately leads to nutrient imbalances. Screen addiction skews kids' relationship with food as they grow up, says nutritionist Sangeetha Aiyer, adding, "As they are glued to the screen, they don't look at the texture of the rice, or the colour of the vegetable. They can't figure out if they like peas more than carrots as you're masking the whole sensory experience."

Over the years, meals no longer focus on food or family time, but become a transactional experience controlled by the screen. "The constant exposure to social media adverts for chips, sugary drinks, and fast food only worsens the problem," says Dr Mahajan, adding, "These products are marketed to look fun and aspirational, so children start craving them more

often. Over time, healthy meals get replaced with processed snacks."

Screens And Satiety

How does too much screen time affect the stomach? Aiyer says it's like stuffing our faces with too much popcorn at the movies. "You think you won't be able to finish the huge tubful. But when the movie is done, it's all in your tummy. That's because it's involuntary. Your brain doesn't know when to tell you to stop until that jumbo tub of caramel popcorn is finished. This is what mindless eating does. The external stimulus of the screen is so high that it switches off all the satiety signals in your brain," she adds.

If a two-hour movie does that to you, imagine what it would do to kids on the smartphone for more hours daily, especially at mealtimes.

A 2022 study, published in Journal of Nutrition, found that prolonged use of smartphones made adolescents more prone to skip breakfast, fruits, and vegetables, and snack on fast food and sweets instead.

Dr Yewale explains how excessive smartphone use disrupts the body's metabolism. "The blue light from screens lowers melatonin, disturbing sleep and upsetting key appetite hormones like ghrelin (the hunger hormone) and leptin (which promotes satiety). As a result, children feel hungrier, crave sugary snacks, and often eat late at night. Sitting for long hours adds to the risk by reducing insulin sensitivity, which can set the

stage for Type 2 diabetes," he says. Research in JAMA Pediatrics and the Indian Journal of Endocrinology and Metabolism shows that school children spending multiple hours a day on screens are more likely to develop obesity, high blood pressure, and abnormal cholesterol levels. "If this continues unchecked, many may go on to face metabolic syndrome, heart disease, hormonal disorders, and even some cancers in adulthood," Dr Yewale adds.

Fast Food Magnet

Consultant nutritionist Geeta Dharmatti says passively scrolling on the smartphone gives a dopamine rush, and junk food or sugary drinks along with that hits the double reward loop. "So, the person craves fast food whenever they hold the phone. Smartphones are rewiring the gut-brain axis, making junk food irresistible."

Nandene Sareen had started ordering in from food delivery apps since 2019, when she was 18. As the Covid lockdown kicked in, she began spending around 3-4 hours with her phone, either playing games and scrolling through Instagram, or obsessively ordering in (sometimes even three meals a day). By the time she sought help from nutritionist Ishi Khosla in 2023, she had turned from 60kg to around 85kg. "She put me on a gluten-free diet and I lost 5kg in three weeks. I also became more focused," says Sareen, though sticking to the plan is still a challenge for her.

Set A Better Example

Kids are great imitators. So, weaning them off screens would need parents to set a better example first, says psychologist Dr Dipti Yadav. "A gradual, guided approach works best. Screens need to be replaced by meaningful alternatives like sports, hobbies, or family time. Children respond best when boundaries are predictable and parents model balanced use themselves," she adds.

Additional reporting by Steffy Thevar and Umesh Isalkar

August 2025 European Journal of Cardiovascular Medicine study: Impact of screen time on emotional eating and obesity risk in school-aged children (<https://healthcare-bulletin.co.uk/article/impact-of-screen-time-on-emotional-eating-and-obesity-risk-in-school-aged-children-4056/>)

2022 Journal of Nutrition study: Smartphone usage patterns and dietary risk factors in adolescents (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S002231662200709X?via%3DIihub>)

JAMA Pediatrics study: Screen time and metabolic risk factors among adolescents (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20603465/>)

Indian Journal of Endocrinology and Metabolism study: Association of screen time usage and physical activity with overweight and obesity among school-going children in UP (<https://www.cureus.com/articles/186223-association-of-screen-time-usage-and-physical-activity-with-overweight-and-obesity-among-school-going-children-in-uttar-pradesh#1/>)

LET'S D-STRESS

THE TIMES OF INDIA

CHANGE Begins Here

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But parents often fail to recognise obesity as a medical problem until other symptoms crop up. Dr Vimal Pahuja, consultant in internal medicine at Dr LH Hiranandani Hospital, Powai, Mumbai, recalls how a 12-year-old boy had gained 8kg in six months after excessive smartphone gaming and a diet of constant junk food — burgers, colas, fried snacks.

"Tests revealed he already had non-alcoholic fatty liver, insulin resistance, vitamin D deficiency, weak bones from lack of outdoor play, poor sleep from late-night screen use, and constant fatigue. His academics suffered too, with reduced focus, attention, and memory," he explains. After counselling the parents and the child, Dr Pahuja reduced his screen time, introduced family walks, and made mealtimes screen-free. Within three