

More girls started puberty early during the COVID-19 pandemic, than in previous years

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The number of girls diagnosed with precocious puberty increased during the COVID-19 pandemic due to potential risk factors such as increased screen time and less physical activity, according to a new study published in the *Journal of the Endocrine Society*. The study was titled, "Precocious Puberty Diagnoses Spike, COVID-19 Pandemic, and Body Mass Index: Findings from a Four-Year Study."

The number of girls referred to pediatric endocrinologists for precocious puberty has increased significantly over the last two years, potentially due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Precocious puberty is when children's bodies begin to change into adult bodies too soon. They start to develop [physical changes](#) before the age of eight such as breasts buds in girls and bigger testes in boys. COVID-19 has also been linked to endocrine diseases such as obesity, which is a known contributor to early puberty in girls.

"Our study confirms the rise in precocious puberty diagnoses during COVID-19 and identifies contributing factors such as poor eating and exercise habits, too much [screen time](#) and impaired sleep," said study author Mohamad Maghnie, M.D., Ph.D., of the University of Genoa and the Giannina Gaslini Institute in Genoa, Italy. "We found an increase in [weight gain](#) among girls diagnosed with precocious puberty during the pandemic, and rapid increase in body weight is associated with advanced pubertal development."

The researchers evaluated the incidence of precocious puberty before

and after the COVID-19 pandemic in 133 girls from Italy. They also examined the possible relationship between COVID-19 and pandemic-related lifestyle changes.

They found 72 cases of precocious puberty before the COVID-19 pandemic (January 2016–March 2020) and 61 cases between March 2020 and June 2021. That equates to four new cases per month.

The researchers also found girls diagnosed with precocious puberty during the COVID-19 pandemic tended to have higher body mass index (BMI) scores than girls who did not. These girls spent an average of two hours per day using [electronic devices](#), and 88.5% of them stopped any [physical activity](#).

"The role of stress, [social isolation](#), increased conflicts between parents, economic status and the increased use of hand and surface sanitizers represent potentially further interesting hypotheses as to why early puberty is increasing in youth," Maghnie said. "Although, the consequence of biological adaptation cannot be entirely ruled out."

More information: Precocious Puberty Diagnoses Spike, COVID-19 Pandemic, and Body Mass Index: Findings from a Four-Year Study, *Journal of the Endocrine Society* (2023).

Provided by The Endocrine Society

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