

Pandemic poses indirect physical, mental health consequences for children: study ^[1]

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Source: CTV News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 25 Jun 2020

AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

While children and teenagers appear to be less likely to be afflicted with severe COVID-19, new research is warning of a number of indirect consequences the pandemic is having on their physical and mental health.

From delays in seeking proper care for illness unrelated to COVID-19 to a heightened risk of family violence, countries' pandemic response measures have taken a substantial toll on the well-being of children around the world.

That's according to a new study published in the Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ) on Thursday, by researchers from The Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids) in Toronto and the University of Exeter in the U.K.

The authors analyzed data from around the world on the pandemic's effect on children's physical, social, and mental health and found indirect consequences that are both immediate and long-term.

Dr. Peter Gill, one of the study's authors and a clinician-investigator in the Division of Paediatric Medicine at SickKids, said reduced access to healthcare during the pandemic can result in potential adverse effects on children's physical health.

He said, if families delay seeking care for their children's non-COVID-19 related illness during the pandemic, the child could present later with more serious illness.

"We've seen this in other countries, such as Italy," he told CTV's Your Morning on Thursday.

Gill also said the pandemic has resulted in widespread delays or omissions of routine childhood vaccinations, which can threaten herd immunity in populations.

What's more, because families are skipping routine checkups, Gill said they may be missing important developmental milestones in their children that may warn them of underlying health conditions.

"Delays in bringing children and young people to medical attention may be due to parental fears of exposure to COVID-19 in hospitals or on public transit, lack of childcare for other children, lack of access to primary care due to closures, or changes to hospital visitation policies," Gill explained in an earlier press release.

In an addition to their physical health, the researchers suggest the pandemic can have a significant impact on children's social and mental well-being too.

Gill said forced isolation and economic uncertainty can lead to heightened stress or conflict in the household, which can put children at higher risk for family violence. He said school closures may increase food insecurity for children who rely on meal programs and put them in a vulnerable position if school is a safe place for them.

The researchers also said families living in inadequate or crowded housing may experience more stress or conflict due to the pandemic, which can cause trauma for children. Refugees, some Indigenous communities, and low-income families are particularly at risk for these outcomes, according to the study.

Socially, Gill said less social interaction and a lack of structured routines can result in increased screen time, reduced physical activity, and higher rates of depression and anxiety among children.

MITIGATION STRATEGIES

In order to mitigate these indirect adverse effects, the researchers published several possible strategies for health-care providers and policymakers.

Gill said, first and foremost, they should communicate clearly to children and families that health-care services are open and accessible.

“We have to continue to provide essential health-care services, such as vaccination and chemotherapy during this pandemic,” he said. “So if you're worried about your child, please seek care.”

The study's authors said families should be made aware of other health-care options, such as virtual visits and different locations.

Secondly, Gill said authorities should explain to families why certain decisions, such as schools reopening, are being made.

“Parents and families need to trust and understand that the factors used to make these decisions that align with their own values and preferences,” he said.

Finally, Gill said it's important to have robust data collection systems in order to generate information that can be used to inform future decisions, such as camps reopening.

“We should be making an effort to collect data to understand the potential impact of reopening on children and their families,” he said.

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