

City sees spike in autism after Covid-19 pandemic: Experts

Late Marriages And Pollution Contribute Too

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Kolkata: The number of children and adults diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) increased substantially in the past few years. Experts believe greater awareness among parents and schools led to the spike. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, ASD is a neurological and developmental disorder that affects how people interact with others, communicate, learn, and behave. Although autism can be diagnosed at any age, it is described as a “developmental disorder” because the symptoms generally appear in the first two years of life.

From 2011 to 2022, autism

LESS SOCIAL INTERACTIONS, MORE SCREEN TIME

➤ In 2021, 1 in 44 children was identified with ASD. In 2023, the number increased to 1 in 36

➤ According to NMHS in 2018, 18.3 per cent was the prevalence of autism in India. This increased to 21.1 per cent in 2023

➤ According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

(DSM-5), a guide created by the American Psychiatric Association that health care providers use to diagnose



mental disorders, people with ASD often have:

- Difficulty with communication and interaction
- Restricted interests and repetitive behaviours
- Symptoms that affect their ability to function in school, work, and other areas of life

prevalence rose from 2.3 per 1,000 people to 6.3 per 1,000 people. Earlier, high-functioning ASD children who were average in academics but hardly had any friends or could not socialise were termed as ‘shy’. However, observant parents and aware schools are now able to identify the issue and provide timely intervention.

“When Soumya Swaminathan, WHO’s chief scientist, visited us, she showed us a direct correlation between

environmental pollution and autism,” Anuradha Lohia, chairperson of Manovikas Kendra, said.

“According to National Mental Health Survey in 2018, 18.3 per cent was the prevalence of autism in India. This increased to 21.1 per cent in 2023. A survey of over 49 lakh children (aged between 18 months to 6 years) was conducted by Integrated Child Development Services in West Bengal, of which 5,840 children were suspected of having ASD,” sa-

id Minu Budhia, psychotherapist and founder of **Carring Minds International**. The clinic saw an increase of 4-5 per cent in high-functioning autism cases since last year, Budhia added.

Covid, however, is not the cause of autism. The disrupted social interactions and increased screen time resulted in behaviour that mimics ASD. Other factors include late marriages and environmental factors such as exposure to mercury, lead, food

grown with pesticides.

Rita Chatterjee, a developmental psychiatrist at SSKM, said the department receives three to four cases every week. Suchandra Mukherjee, a paediatrician at SSKM, said, “In most cases, if it’s not autism in particular, it is a behavioural issue due to excessive usage of mobile phones (particularly after the COVID period).” Sumita Saha, paediatrician at Fortis Hospital, said paediatricians are also becoming more aware with increasing workshops by the India Academy of Paediatricians to address autism.

Kanchan Mukhopadhyay, director of the Centre for Brain Function Therapy, Centre for Stress Management, Centre for Molecular Diagnostics, and Centre for Biomedical Research, said that they provide autistic children with puzzles as it is good for them and they are relatively more fond of it. Neurofeedback therapy is also given to help develop healthier brain activity patterns.