

Mobile phones, social isolation and medical issues



YOUR HEALTH

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An incredible 97 per cent of the population owns mobile phones in both urban and rural India. Many smartphones offer not only calling but also data usage. It is no longer a luxury item.

Phones are no longer used like landlines were, just for conversations. They are used for WhatsApp, Instagram and to watch song-and-dance sequences, movies and reels. Information is transmitted constantly. In academic institutions, it is projects, homework and tuition; in offices, it is often reams of data. For some, it is just a desire to stay up to date and know what is going on in the world and within the family.

Mobile phones are easy to carry. This means you can walk or drive while using the phone. No matter how good you are at multitasking, trying to manage both at once leads to accidents.

Pedestrians may step into traffic or ditches and potholes without realising it. They may step on or get too close to stray animals and could even be attacked. Driving involves split-second reactions. Using a mobile phone or texting while driving can be fatal. Many people on two-wheelers balance their phones on one shoulder and hold them in place by tilting their heads while negotiating city streets. If they also do not wear helmets, this is an accident waiting to happen. It is worth remembering that a call is an emergency for the caller, not the receiver. It is not worth dying for.

Children easily get addicted to mobile phones. Initially, parents may use it as a pacifier, allowing children to watch something to keep them quiet. It may be used to coax a picky eater to finish meals. It may be because homework is

sent on a mobile device. Very soon, older children learn to pretend to be working on homework, finish it quickly and then start scrolling. Parents usually leave the child and the mobile phone alone while they study and have no clue what is going on.

Many studies have established that the dangers of mobile phones are not radiation or brain tumours. It is social isolation, where children spend time alone and do not interact with their peers. Sleep deprivation and irritability set in as they spend more time playing video games instead of sleeping. Business, work and academics suffer. Sleep is affected as they addictively scroll. In teenagers, the images they see make them feel inferior, as if they can never achieve what they see. This can result in feelings of low self-worth, anxiety, depression and even suicidal thoughts or actions. They may lose touch with reality.

Excessive screen time leads to a sedentary lifestyle. Snacking and fast-food intake increase. This leads to obesity and PCOD in girls. It can also result in early onset of diabetes and hypertension.

All screens emit blue light. If the phone is in the room, it can lead to poor-quality sleep. Staring at the screen for long periods can cause eye strain and fatigue. The visuals are often so engaging that people forget to blink, which can aggravate eye problems.

Poor posture while using mobile phones can lead to "text neck", with neck and shoulder pain as the bones become misaligned. The thumbs and fingers can hurt because of constant texting.

Children are particularly vulnerable to these problems. Recognising this, some countries have restricted the use of mobile phones for those under 16 years of age.

As a country, we need to control our use of cell phones, both in adults and children. Perhaps we should return to the era when phones were used for just that, telephoning.



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The writer has a family practice at Vellore and is the author of *Staying Healthy in Modern India*. If you have any questions on health issues please write to yourhealthgm@yahoo.co.in