

Kids gain weight after circuit breaker from no outdoor play

Study of 585 kids finds that for one group, for example, median BMI rose from 16.3 to 19.1

Cheryl Tan

Children in Singapore put on weight after the two-month circuit breaker, which saw residents adhering to a strict stay-at-home order from April 2020, a local study has found.

Researchers noted that even after measures were relaxed from June 2 that year, a “substantial proportion” of children stopped outdoor play for a further one to three months.

The weight gained was not insignificant. For example, the median weight for school-aged boys, nine to 11 years old, increased from 28.8kg before February 2020, to 38.3kg after August 2020. This meant their median body mass index (BMI) rose from 16.3 to 19.1.

The research team said the study was the first to establish a link between specific changes in behaviour during the pandemic and longer-term changes resulting in increased body mass in children.

The study was helmed by Dr Jonathan Huang, a principal investigator at the Agency for Science, Technology and Research’s Singapore Institute for Clinical Sciences (SICS).

The research was conducted in collaboration with clinician-scientists from KK Women’s and Children’s Hospital, National University Hospital and the National University of Singapore’s Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine.

The team found that of the 585 children it monitored, more than a third of schoolgoers and a quarter of pre-school children did not have any outdoor play two months after the circuit breaker.

When their BMI was checked about a year post-circuit breaker, the school-aged children who ceased outdoor activity had a higher BMI reading, by at least half a unit, with boys on average putting on more weight than girls.

“Many pandemic studies in other countries have looked at changes during and after their lockdown periods,” said Dr Huang.

“What’s unique about Singapore and our study is that we had a short circuit breaker, and a lot of activi-

ties resumed soon after, yet a substantial number of children had reported elimination of all outdoor activities, which could have led to an increase in body mass among this group.”

Previous studies have estab-

lished strong links between obesity in children and adults.

For example, a Health Promotion Board study in 2017 showed that 70 per cent of overweight children later became obese adults.

Obesity has a correlation with chronic diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease later in life if left unattended.

Ms Sum Ka Kei, an epidemiologist at SICS and first author of the

study, said active play indoors may not be sufficient to replace outdoor activity, particularly for children who are older.

“It is important to understand how to address this effectively, as outdoor time is associated with numerous other benefits to children, including better sleep, learning and socio-emotional development.”

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Over a third of schoolgoers and a quarter of pre-school children did not have any outdoor play two months after the circuit breaker. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO