

this saying, "Decline in pubertal age can lead to both psychosocial and public health challenges. Studies have noted that early age at menarche is strongly associated with early marriage and premature parenthood, substance abuse and delinquent behaviour, poor academic performance, nutritional transitions, growth variations, sexual abuse, obesity, breast cancer, ovarian cancer, psychological disorders (stress, anxiety, and depression), and metabolic syndrome (diabetes, coronary heart disease, stroke and respiratory problems)." Other common side-effects include compromised adult height and glycemic disorders. Dr Witty Raina of Cloudnine Hospital, Gurgaon, makes a valid point, when she says, "In India, while menstruation is celebrated as the coming of age; ironically, it is also considered a 'dirty time'. So, due to lack of acceptance of early symptoms such as menstruation, the girl undergoes anxiety and isolation. Emotional disturbance like tetchiness, anxiety and anger, tend to impact the girl mentally because she is confused about her body and is unaware of the changes that are happening to her. This leads to victimisation in society.

If early anxiety is not taken care of, it can lead to absenteeism from school, low self-confidence, difficulty in making friends and a general sense of discomfort in adjusting to their external environment."

PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE

Looking at the myriad problems associated with precocious puberty, it definitely seems prudent for mothers to take precautionary steps to not let this phenomenon afflict their daughters.

But, that is easier said than done. Genetics play a major role in deciding when a girl will get her menses. However, even though we cannot control our genes, we can definitely control the other factors that lead to early puberty. "Encouraging children to have a healthy lifestyle helps them in the long run. Eating fruits and vegetables daily, indulging in plenty of outdoor activities, cutting down on high calorie foods like chocolates, cakes, donuts, colas, pizzas, chips help in keeping the child's weight in the normal range, which helps in preventing not just early puberty but lots of other health problems later in life," avers Dr Anita K. Mohan, Fortis Hospital, Bengaluru. Dr Duru Shah of Gynaecworld Clinic, Mumbai, also points to plastic as a seemingly innocuous but potent enemy of young girls. "Plastic contains environmental toxins that contribute to the early onset of puberty. Avoid using plastic water bottles and plastic food containers, especially for reheating. It is also advisable to avoid food items wrapped in plastic," she says. If one is to be especially careful, you should use BPA-free pacifiers, bottles and teething rings for your baby. Glass or wood could be healthy replacements for these items. Proliferation of phthalates can be reduced by using only natural cleaning products at home. Avoid using artificial air fresheners, dryer sheets, fabric softeners or other synthetic fragrances because they disrupt your hormone balance. Replace your nonstick pots and pans with ceramic or glass cookware. Avoid non-fermented soy, especially if you're pregnant and also in infant formula.

Diet plays an important role in avoiding this problem. Nutritionist Avaneesh Mehta Pareekh avers that due to today's fast-moving lifestyle, instant noodles, biscuits, pastries, cheese balls and ready-

