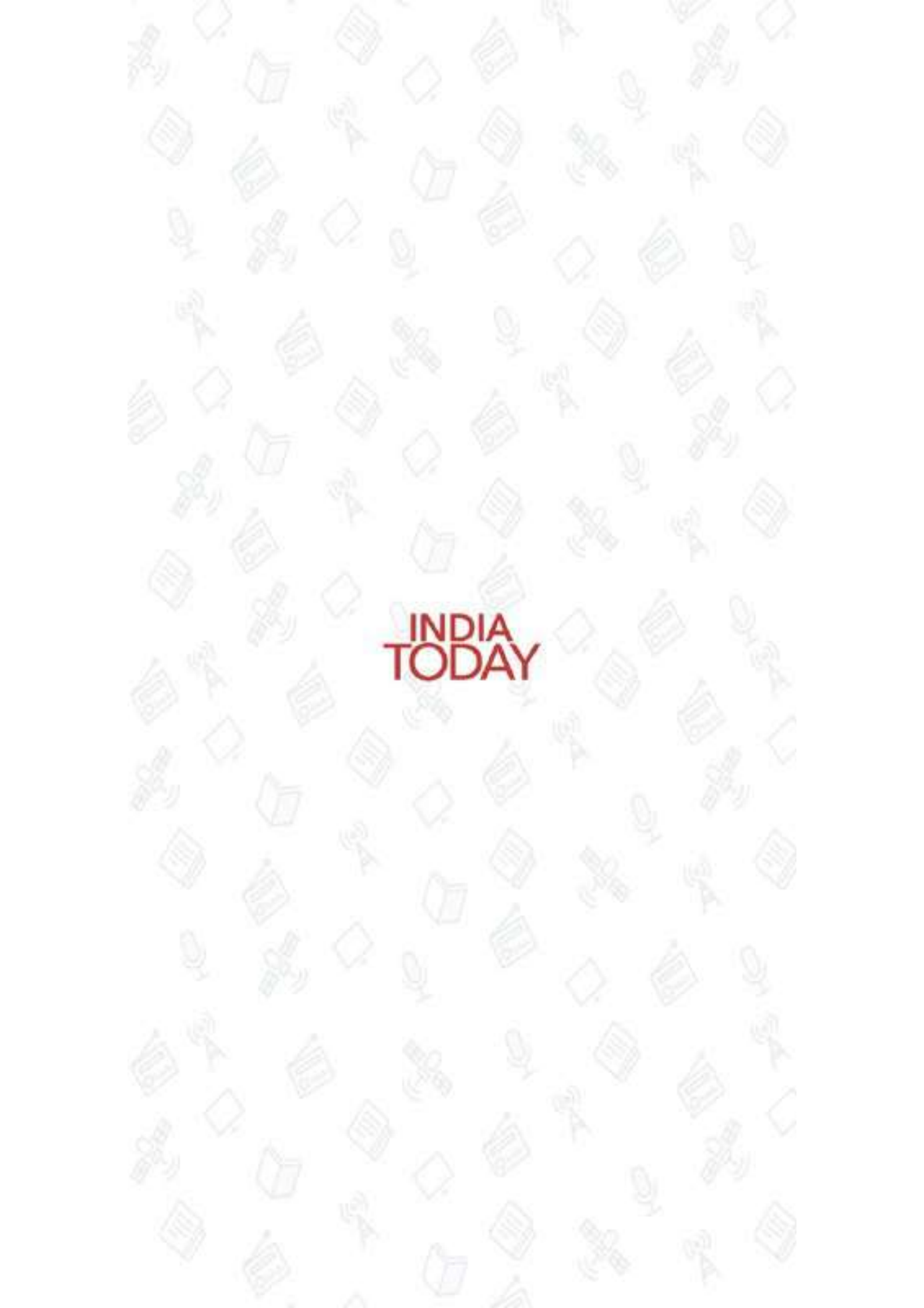




INDIA
TODAY



Scientific evidence has long shown that chronic exposure to fine particulate matter increases the risk of premature death among children. (Photo: Getty Images)

Delhi kids may die earlier, be dumber, get sicker - and perform badly in school



Sonal Mehrotra Kapoor

New Delhi, UPDATED: November 14, 2025 07:30 IST

Highlights

- Delhi's children inhale hazardous air daily risking their health
- Experts warn Gen Alpha in Delhi may die younger due to pollution



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- Experts warn Gen Alpha in Delhi may die younger due to pollution
- Brain development and IQ of Delhi kids are harmed by smog

Its Children's Day, and kids in Delhi are waking up to skies the colour of ash. Their crayons still have a "sky" blue, but they don't know what that looks like.



Because in Delhi–NCR, children aren't just growing up — they're gasping up. The air that's supposed to help them live, learn, and play is the very air shortening their lives.

And now experts have concluded that Gen Alpha born and living in Delhi is likely to die earlier, be dumber, get sicker, and perform badly in school — simply by breathing.

Let's tell you how, by quoting nothing new. These are warnings doctors have been giving us since 2017 and we at India Today have been reporting relentlessly.

1. DIE EARLIER: When Every Breath Takes You Closer to the Edge

Scientific evidence has long shown that chronic exposure to fine particulate matter (PM.) increases the risk of premature death among children, primarily from lower respiratory infections and pneumonia (Gupta et al., 2021, Environmental Research; Orellano et al., 2020, Science of the Total Environment). Meta-analyses across South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa confirm higher infant and under-five mortality linked to ambient air pollution (Lelieveld et al., 2020, PNAS).

If you were born in Delhi five years ago, you've already spent 826 days breathing 'poor' or worse air — nearly half your life inhaling poison. For 81 of those days, it was "severe." ([India Today DIU](#), 2024)

These are children who've done nothing wrong except be born in the wrong pin code.

Back in 2019, the Centre for Science and Environment warned:

"Air pollution has become a national emergency killing one lakh children under five every year in India." — ([India Today](#), June 2019)

Doctors are seeing this play out in real time — stunted lungs, inflamed airways, higher risks of pneumonia, and premature deaths.

Every year we say, "something must be done." Every winter, we do nothing.

2. BE DUMBER: The Smog That Eats Young Brains

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There's now clear evidence that dirty air harms brain development. Long-term exposure to PM. and NO in childhood has been associated with structural brain changes and measurable cognitive decline (Sunyer et al., 2015, Lancet Planetary Health; Calder³n-Garcidueas et al., 2016, Brain & Cognition). Prenatal exposure alone can lower IQ scores and memory function later in childhood (Perera et al., 2019, [Environmental Health Perspectives](#)).

A 2024 US study featured by India Today found that prolonged exposure to polluted air can hamper children's learning, memory, and attention spans.

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And the irony?

Brain & Cognition). Prenatal exposure alone can lower IQ scores and memory function later in childhood (Perera et al., 2019, [Environmental Health Perspectives](#)).

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Way back in 2017, [UNICEF had already warned](#) that "17 million babies live in areas where air pollution is six times higher than global limits, potentially putting their brain development at risk." — (India Today, Dec 2017)

We knew the smog was eating into our kids' potential — and yet, we let them keep inhaling it.



3. GET SICKER: Cough, Wheeze, Repeat

Medical research has shown that each 10 g/m increase in PM₁₀ corresponds with significant rises in hospital visits for asthma, bronchitis, and pneumonia among children (Zheng et al., 2021, Allergy; Nhung et al., 2019, Environmental Research). Because children breathe faster and have smaller airways, pollutants penetrate deeper and cause greater inflammation (WHO, 2021).

Delhi's hospitals have turned into paediatric crisis ward. The waiting rooms are packed with coughing children, struggling to breathe through the smog.

"Children are not responding to 5–7-day medication courses anymore. A minimum two-week course is required now. Children as young as one year old are coming with respiratory problems." — Dr Vivek Nangia (India Today, Nov 2019)

And it's only getting worse. In 2025, AIIMS doctors report a 15–20 percent spike in respiratory cases every time air quality nosesdives.



We're raising a generation whose first memory of winter isn't fog — it's the sound of an inhaler.

4. PERFORM BADLY IN SCHOOL: When Air Becomes the New Barrier to Learning

Large-scale studies have found that chronic air-pollution exposure lowers school test scores and cognitive performance (Zhang et al., 2018, PNAS; Heissel et al., 2021, American Economic Journal: Applied Economics). Even short-term spikes in PM_{2.5} during exam days are linked to measurable declines in student performance.

The same 2024 study found that children exposed to chronic pollution perform worse in memory and cognitive tests. They're more likely to lose focus, tire faster, and skip school altogether.

Back in 2017, UNICEF had already said air pollution "forces children to miss school and can cause long-lasting damage to their health and well-being."

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their health and well-being.

A teacher in East Delhi told us half her students start the morning prayer coughing.

How can a child learn multiplication when she's counting her breaths?

NOT JUST DELHI. NOT JUST WINTER

Gurugram, Noida, Lucknow, Kanpur — all are reporting “very poor to severe” AQI levels. This year, 10 of the 15 most polluted cities in the world were in India.

This isn't a Delhi crisis. It's a national emergency with playgrounds as ground zero.

THE FINAL BREATH: We've Run Out of Excuses

For nearly a decade, doctors, scientists, and parents have begged for action.

Instead, we've normalised the haze. We've taught our kids that it's “just smog season.”

Clean air isn't a luxury. It's a fundamental right.



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So this Children's Day, don't gift another toy.

Gift them what they've never had — a chance to breathe.

Because if we don't act now, next year's Children's Day might just be another reminder of what we took from them — their right to live, learn, and dream under a blue sky.

- Ends ■