

TOILET TALKS

Big ideas from
the smallest room



Toilet Talks factsheet series

Health and water, sanitation and hygiene



Unsafe water and sanitation, one foundation of poor health

- 1 1/3 of healthcare facilities worldwide lack soap and clean water necessary for healthcare workers to clean their hands¹.
- 2 1/4 of healthcare facilities worldwide have no water service. That means 2 billion people visit clinics, doctors' offices and hospitals that lack running water².
- 3 20% of healthcare facilities lack sanitation services to safely remove human waste. So, 1.5 billion people go to healthcare facilities that have no functioning toilet systems.
- 4 829,000 people – more than the population of the city of Seattle – die annually from diarrhoea due to unsafe drinking water and poor sanitation and hygiene³.
- 5 13% of deaths of children younger than 5 are due to poor water, sanitation and hygiene standards, something that is preventable⁴.
- 6 10% of the global population is estimated to eat food that has been irrigated with wastewater, much of it untreated, creating a significant health risk⁵.

Hygiene, sanitation and women: what you should know

- 1 Handwashing after using the bathroom and before eating or preparing food, a duty that often falls on women, helps prevent the spread of diseases.
- 2 Periods really shouldn't be taboo. 26% of the global population menstruate between two and seven days each month.
- 3 Cleanliness matters. Menstrual hygiene management (MHM) involves the use of clean menstrual management materials including sanitary pads that can be changed in privacy as frequently as needed, having safe disposal for MHM materials and using soap and water to cleanse the body as necessary.
- 4 Poor WASH affects maternal and newborn health. 1 million deaths annually are linked to unclean births.

It's time for action!

Clean water and functioning sanitation and hygiene systems are essential for human health – a fact that the United Nations focuses on with Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6,) which aims for clean water, sanitation and hygiene for all. Sustainable

WASH services for every person need to be at the centre of all global health talks. In order to achieve this goal by 2030, this critical aspect of infectious disease prevention must be extensively funded in the global health space.

Global Health Crisis Linked to Poor Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Systems

As the COVID-19 global pandemic has shown the world, good health is necessary for people to participate in a functioning society, earn a living, advance educationally, maintain social networks and drive a successful economy. Having access to clean water and utilising quality sanitation systems and hygiene practices mitigate the risk of contracting and spreading infectious diseases.

Health/Infectious diseases overview

Inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene is a significant accelerator to global disease, allowing infections to spread and leading to serious illness and death, especially in young children. Unsafe water and water with inadequate access contribute to many illnesses including diarrhoeal diseases, lower respiratory infections, hepatitis A and intestinal worms. Cholera, typhoid fever and polio are diseases that thrive when there are no safe, functioning sanitation systems.

WASH for health in homes

In 2020, 3.6 billion people still didn't have

access to a functioning toilet that safely removes waste. That same year 2 billion people lacked safely managed drinking water and 2.3 billion people lacked handwashing facilities in their homes.

Some groups are more vulnerable. Approximately 23% of the world's population live in fragile circumstances, including communities that have suffered war, political instability, refugee crises and where more than three quarters of the people are living in extreme poverty. People residing in fragile contexts often have even lower levels of clean water, sanitation and hygiene services.

Clean water and soap can also help reduce the spread of some neglected tropical diseases (NTD), many of which are prevalent in the global south, including trachoma, lymphatic filariasis and intestinal worms.⁶

WASH for health in healthcare facilities

Globally, too many healthcare facilities in low-income countries have poor sanitation and hygiene systems and many try to function without clean water. More than 30% have no soap and clean water to allow for proper handwashing, a necessity for healthcare workers to have in order to avoid spreading infections to patients. All these problems increase the risk of infection for patients, who are already ill,



and healthcare workers.

Managing medical waste, including used needles, expired pharmaceuticals and disinfectants is critical for keeping communities healthy. Unsafe disposal of healthcare waste, including needles, syringes and wastewater, is dangerous for healthcare workers, patients, and waste handlers. An assessment done by WHO/ UNCEF in 24 countries found that only 58% of healthcare facilities sampled had adequate systems for safe disposal of medical waste.⁶

It is critical that governments develop national policies and standards for clean water, sanitation and hygiene services.

“Inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene is a significant accelerator to global disease”

These strategies should aim to help with infection prevention and control (IPC).

WASH for health in schools

Children spend a substantial portion of their day in school. It is essential that educational facilities have functioning water, sanitation and hygiene systems. However, in 2016, 19% of schools globally still had no drinking water, leaving 570 million students, mostly in the global south, lacking access to clean water in their educational facility.⁷

That same year 23% of schools had no sanitation services, meaning nearly one in five primary schools and one in eight secondary schools had no safe, functioning toilet systems for their students.⁸ A functioning toilet system includes toilets that are separated for boys and girls, so they allow children to maintain privacy and dignity and allow the proper space for girls to manage their periods.

900 million children globally go to school without handwashing facilities with soap and water on site, with some of the highest percentages located in sub-Saharan Africa, southeast Asia and east Asia.⁹ That's 36% of schools. An estimated 335 million girls attend primary and secondary schools that do not have proper handwashing facilities – an essential service for females who need to change sanitary products for a portion of the month.¹⁰

WASH and menstrual hygiene

Approximately one quarter of the world's population is female and of reproductive age. This means that nearly 1.9 billion women menstruate every month.¹¹ Yet despite the fact that a substantial portion of the population menstruates, it remains a taboo topic.

It's time to start talking about it! Poor menstrual hygiene is seriously detrimental to women's health. Lack of clean water and functioning toilets with safe waste removal are responsible for 800,000 deaths by a year – making it the fifth leading cause of adult women's death globally.¹²

The impacts of menstrual hygiene inequality and injustice are significant. Many girls are unable to maintain their personal hygiene and cannot afford or do not have access to sanitary napkins, so they often end up missing many days of school each month, or dropping out completely. Girls who don't attend school are more likely to suffer malnourishment, child marriage, early pregnancy or domestic violence alongside negative long-term career and earning impacts.

Poor WASH services cause loss of education and lost wages for people who spend hours each day fetching water, and stay home sick due to contracting infectious

diseases from drinking dirty water and having inadequate sanitation and hygiene systems. This inequity must change.¹³

In 2012, the WHO calculated that for each US\$ 1 that is invested in quality sanitation services, we gain a return of US\$ 5.50 in terms of productivity, lower healthcare costs and a decrease in premature deaths.

But this can't just be limited to a simple mathematical equation – we need to allow every person in the world to live in dignity. Clean water, sanitation and hygiene systems are human rights. We've been moving too slowly – the time to fix it is now.

Sources

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