Sanitation is vital for good health

Globally, diseases caused by exposure to our faeces are making us sick. Diarrhoea is not the only health effect of poor hygiene and sanitation – cholera, dysentery, worms, trachoma, pneumonia and malnutrition, to name just a few, could also be reduced through improved sanitation and hygiene.

More than 800,000 children under age 5 die every year due to diarrhoeal diseases. Diarrhoea is caused when the pathogens present in our faeces end up in our stomachs. This happens when we do not wash our hands after using a latrine or toilet, or before we prepare and eat food. Pathogens can also be transmitted by food, water, soil, animals and flies.

Proper sanitation and improved hygiene can build barriers to prevent the spread of these diseases. Open defecation and inadequate sanitation creates a source from which communicable diseases can spread, placing society as a whole at risk.

Diarrhoea is the second biggest killer of children under 5 in the world, despite intensive international efforts to reduce the number of deaths it causes. Oral rehydration therapy (ORT) has more than halved the global toll of acute watery diarrhoea during the past 20 years. The remaining deaths are increasingly due to persistent and bloody diarrhoea, which does not respond to ORT. For these, the best cure is prevention – through better hygiene and sanitation.

Diarrhoea is closely linked to undernutrition, a condition that is associated with more than a third of all deaths among children under age 5. Repeated episodes of diarrhoea and parasite infections lead to reduced absorption of nutrients. This contributes to malnutrition, thus continuing the cycle of ill health. For example, undernourished children have weakened immune systems and are at a higher risk for developing pneumonia, which kills more children under age 5 than any other disease. This chain reaction illustrates that hygiene and sanitation are fundamental for child survival and the health of the whole population. Ending open defecation is the first step in breaking this cycle.

Control of cholera is a major problem in several Asian countries, as well as in Africa. From 2004–2008, the World Health Organization received notifications of more than 830,000 cases, representing a 24 per cent increase in cases reported for this most recent five-year period. Proper personal and food hygiene, coupled with hygienic disposal of human excreta, is an effective intervention to prevent the spread of cholera.

Intestinal worms affect an estimated 400 million school-aged children in the developing world. Worms are spread when children inadvertently ingest human faeces or food contaminated with faeces. This happens mainly when proper latrines or toilets and hand-washing facilities are

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lacking. Chronic hookworm infections are associated with reduced physical growth and impaired intellectual development. Worms have an enormous impact on children’s ability to learn. Children suffering from intense whipworm infections miss twice as many school days as their worm-free.6

**Trachoma** occurs worldwide, most often in poor rural communities in developing countries. Around 6 million people are blind due to trachoma, and more than 150 million are in need of treatment.7 Simple prevention includes improving sanitation and encouraging children to wash their face with clean water.

**Polio** is another faecal-oral disease; for centuries, the only line of defence we had was improved sanitation. Since the development of effective vaccines in the 1950s, the importance of sanitation in controlling polio is often forgotten.

**Good sanitation and hygiene stop the spread of diseases**

One hundred per cent of roundworm, whipworm and hookworm cases are related to poor water, sanitation and hygiene.8 Improving the disposal of human excreta can reduce illness due to diarrhoea. When combined with hand washing, this impact can be doubled.

It is very difficult, however, to properly dispose excreta when it is spread over a large area, and hand washing is more difficult in the bush. Sanitation improvements save children’s lives and improve their health, growth and development. In addition to lowering the rates of diarrhoea, improved excreta disposal and hand washing reduces parasitic infections, worm infections and trachoma.

**What happens when we stop open defecation and improve sanitation?**

- **Lower mortality** (rates of death) due to diarrhoea – a 34 per cent reduction through improved sanitation, which could be doubled if accompanied by hand washing with soap.9
- **Better nutrition**, reduced stunting and increased height among children, due to the reduction in diarrhoea and other life-threatening diseases.
- **Improved learning** and retention among school children due to reduction in worms and other sanitation related diseases.

**Take action!**


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