Handwashing Day, 15 October
Fast facts about handwashing

Global Handwashing Day aims to transform handwashing from an abstract idea to an automatic behaviour

Why a Global Day for Handwashing with Soap?

Handwashing with soap is the most effective and inexpensive way to prevent diarrhoeal and acute respiratory infections, which take the lives of millions of children in developing countries every year. Yet, despite its lifesaving potential, handwashing with soap is seldom practiced and difficult to promote.

The challenge is to transform handwashing with soap from a good idea into an automatic behaviour performed in homes, schools, and communities worldwide. A vast change in handwashing behaviour is critical to meeting the Millennium Development Goal of reducing deaths among children under the age of five by two thirds by 2015.

Initiated in 2008 by the Global Public-Private Partnership for Handwashing with Soap, Global Handwashing Day is endorsed by a wide array of governments, international institutions, civil society organizations, NGOs, private companies and individuals around the globe.

Fast facts

- Over 1.5 million children under five die each year as a result of diarrhoea.[i] It is the second most common cause of child deaths worldwide.[ii] In Mozambique, diarrhoeal disease is the fifth most important cause of under-five mortality,[iii] gastrointestinal diseases contributing almost seven per cent to the total number of deaths.[iv]
- Handwashing with soap at critical times – including before eating or preparing food and after using the toilet – can reduce diarrhoea rates by more than 40 per cent.[v]
- Handwashing with soap can reduce the incidence of acute respiratory infections (ARI) by 23 per cent.[vi]
- Handwashing can be a critical measure in controlling pandemic outbreaks of respiratory infections. Several studies suggest that washing hands more than 10 times a day can cut the spread of respiratory viruses by 55 per cent.[vii]
- Handwashing with soap has been cited as one of the most cost-effective interventions to prevent diarrhoeal related deaths and disease.[viii]
- A review of several studies shows that handwashing in institutions such as primary schools and day-care centres reduce the incidence of diarrhoea by an average of 30 per cent.[ix]
- Rates of handwashing around the world are low. Observed rates of handwashing with soap at critical moments – i.e., before handling food and after using the toilet – range from zero to 34 per cent.[x]
- A study shows that handwashing with soap by birth attendants and mothers significantly increased newborn survival rates by up to 44 per cent.[xi]
- New studies suggest that handwashing promotion in schools can play a role in reducing absenteeism among primary school children. In China, for example, promotion and distribution of soap in primary schools resulted in 54 per cent fewer days of absence among students compared to schools without such an intervention.[xii]

---

[i] Prüss-Üstün A, Bos R, Gore F, Bartram J. Safer water, better health: costs, benefits and sustainability of interventions to protect and promote health. World Health Organization, Geneva, 2008.

[ii] UNICEF (2008). The State of the world's children 2008.
[iii] Instituto Nacional de Estatística, Inquérito de Indicadores Múltiplos (MICS), 2008, Moçambique
[iv] Ministério da Saúde, Estudo Nacional sobre a Mortalidade Infantil, 2009, Moçambique
[v] Curtis, V., and S. Cairncross. 2003. "Effect of Washing Hands with Soap on Diarrhea Risk in the Community: A Systematic Review." Lancet Infectious Diseases 3: 275–81.
[vi] Rabie, T and Curtis, V. (2006): Handwashing and risk of respiratory infections: a quantitative systematic review. Tropical Medicine and International Health, 11(3), 258-267.
[vii] Tom Jefferson, Chris Del Mar, Liz Dooley, Eliana Ferroni, Lubna A Al-Ansary, Ghada A Bawazeer, Mieke L van Driel, Ruth Foxlee, Alessandro Rivetti. (2009). Physical interventions to interrupt or reduce the spread of respiratory viruses: systematic review. BMJ 2009;339:b3675, doi: 10.1136/bmj.b3675 (Published 22 September 2009)
[viii] Cairncross, S. Valdmanis V. 2006. Water supply, sanitation and hygiene promotion. Chapter 41. In. Disease Control Priorities in Developing Countries. Second Edition. Edt. Jameson et al 2006. The World Bank. Washington DC: National Institutes of Health.
[ix] Cochrane 2008 - Ejemot RI, Ehiri JE, Meremikwu MM, Critchley JA. Hand washing for preventing diarrhoea. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2008, Issue 1. Art. No.: CD004265. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD004265.pub2.
[x] Scott B, Curtis V & Rabie, T. 2003. Protecting children from diarrhoea and acute respiratory infections: the role of handwashing promotion in water and sanitation programmes. WHO Regional Health Forum 7, 42–47
[xi] Victor Rhee; Luke C. Mullany; Subarna K. Khatry; Joanne Katz; Steven C. LeClerq; Gary L. Darmstadt; James M. Tielsch. Maternal and Birth Attendant.Hand Washing and Neonatal Mortality in Southern Nepal Arch Pediatr AdolescMed. 2008;162(7):603-608.
[xii] Bowen et al 2007. A cluster-randomized controlled trial evaluating the effect of a handwashing-promotion program in Chinese primary schools. am. j. trop. med. hyg., 76(6), 2007, pp. 1166–1173