



Washing hands with soap can save lives

Hand washing is a major tool for fighting infectious disease, says Amref Health Africa as the world marks Global Handwashing Day

October 13, 2014

The simple act of washing hands with soap has the potential to save millions of lives in Africa yet hand washing remains one of the most neglected life-saving practices. Hundreds of millions of people across the globe will celebrate Global Handwashing Day on October 15, conveying the message that hand washing with soap is an effective, simple, and affordable way to prevent diseases.

Amref Health Africa joins the world in commemorating this important day. Every year, more than 3.5 million children under the age of five die from diarrhoea and acute lower respiratory tract infections, three-quarters of them in sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia. These communicable diseases are caused by transmission of micro-organisms (bacteria or virus) from one person to another, either by direct contact, or through contaminated air, food or water. Many of the deaths could be avoided by curtailing transmission through improved hygiene; in fact, 75 per cent of illnesses in homes can be prevented through adoption of good hygiene practices.

Hand washing with soap is one of the most effective and cost-effective means of preventing the infections that kill millions of children in Africa each year, and therefore a major tool for fighting disease on the continent. Unfortunately, good hand washing is not commonly practised. Although people do tend to wash their hands with water, very few do so with soap at what are considered critical moments – after using the toilet, after cleaning a child, and before handling food. Yet washing hands with water alone is not enough to get rid of germs – soap is important. Interestingly, even poor families have soap in their homes, but it is rarely used for hand washing. Laundry, bathing and washing dishes are seen as the priorities for soap use.

It is noteworthy that despite diarrhoea being the second biggest killer of children, critical interventions to prevent these deaths do not attract adequate attention from the international community and development programmes. Governments in Africa and development partners must target resources to diseases that are killing the greatest number of children and support cost-effective interventions. Washing hands after using the toilet or before handling food for example, is an easy and affordable intervention that can reduce diarrhoea among children under five by almost 50 per cent, and cut respiratory infections by as much as 25 per cent. In fact, hand washing with soap is the single most cost-effective life-saving intervention within the technological and financial reach of all countries and communities. Research shows that a US\$3.35 investment in hand washing brings the same health benefits as an US\$11.00 investment in latrine construction, a US\$200 investment in household water supply and an investment of thousands of dollars in immunisation.

To protect children from diarrhoea and improve the world's hygiene and sanitation environment, Amref Health Africa is encouraging good hand washing habits among children as a 'do-it-yourself' vaccine against diarrhoeal disease, and for reduction of many illnesses such as respiratory, eye and skin infections. To this is engaged in a series of community-based initiatives aimed at significantly reducing illness and deaths of children on the continent. Through its Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) programme, the organisation promotes behavioural change as a lasting remedy to hygiene-related illnesses. In addition, Amref Health Africa endeavours to get the government, corporates and communities to work together to develop programmes that promote reliable and life-saving sanitation and hygiene-related interventions.

School-age children are an important means of transmitting information on sanitation and hygiene to their communities. Amref Health Africa's experience from its Personal Hygiene and Sanitation Education (PHASE) programme has demonstrated that hand washing behaviour can be changed on a large scale through social marketing approaches. The primary target of the PHASE programme is school-age children who are given knowledge and skills on sanitation and hygiene, and in turn become behaviour change agents in their families and communities. Amref Health Africa's WASH programme also promotes building of toilets and hand washing stations that benefit not only the children and teachers, but also communities around the schools.

On this important day, Amref Health Africa calls upon all stakeholders, public and private sectors, and communities, to join hands with it in promoting hand washing to save lives as we strive to achieve lasting health change in Africa.

Ends

References

- *(Curtis V, Cairncross S, "Effect of Washing Hands with Soap on Diarrhoea Risk in the Community)*
- *Case study: Public-Private Partnership to Promote Hand Washing in Ghana, 2010*