

Diarrheal Disease

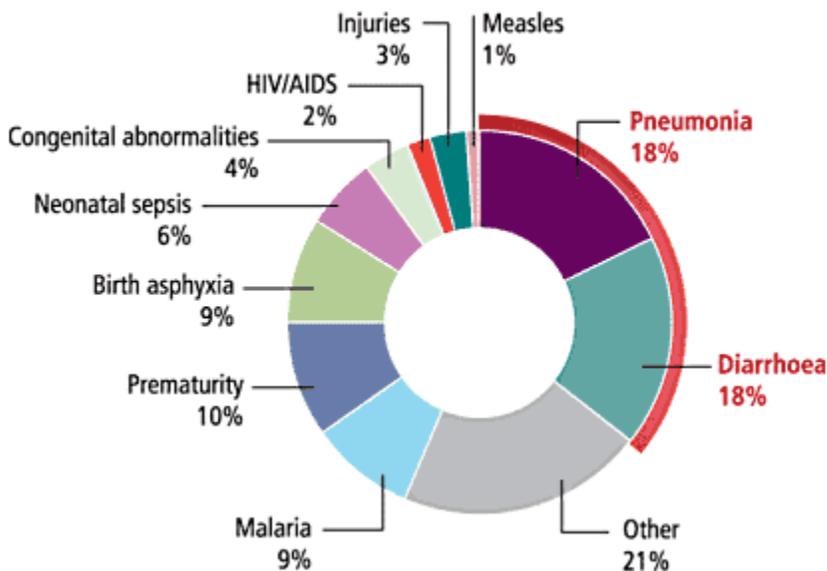
WHO Fact Sheet No. 330, August 2009

Key facts

- Diarrheal disease is the second leading cause of death in children under five years old. It is both preventable and treatable.
- Diarrheal disease kills 1.5 million children every year. (*Editorial - >4000/day or 1 in 21 seconds!*)
- Globally, there are about two billion cases of diarrheal disease every year.
- Diarrheal disease mainly affects children under two years old.
- Diarrhoea is a leading cause of malnutrition in children under five years old.

“Antimicrobial resistance and its global spread threaten the continued effectiveness of many medicines used today to treat infectious diseases.” (World Health Organization, 2011)

- **Saving Childrens’ Lives:** Diarrheal dehydration is the #2 killer of children in the developing world. It kills almost 2 million under the age of five annually...more than AIDS, malaria and measles combined.



Source: WHO, [World Health Statistics 2011](#)

“A ‘cure’ for diarrhea – something that would stop the condition safely and effectively, within a few hours – does not exist.” (Mother and Child Health Education Trust, 2009)

- **Protecting Travelers & Athletes:** Each year 100 million people travel from developed countries to areas of high diarrhea risk. 40% of them will contract severe debilitating diarrhea for several days. There is no recognized safe commercial preventative and treatment options are very limited.

Relieving Chronic Digestive Illness: One in 7 Americans suffer from some chronic intestinal condition with no effective remedy for their debilitating ailments. (American Society of Gastroenterologists)

"Diarrhea is the world's most effective weapon of mass destruction."

[Rose George](#), *The Big Necessity: The Unmentionable World of Human Waste and Why it Matters*



Children with diarrhoea are at risk of dying due to dehydration, and early and appropriate fluid replacement is a main intervention to prevent death. Yet few children with diarrhoea in developing countries receive appropriate treatment with oral rehydration therapy and continued feeding (39 per cent).

Even fewer receive solutions made of oral rehydration salts (ORS) alone (one-third), and the past decade has seen no real progress in improving coverage across developing countries.

Moreover, the poorest children in the poorest countries are least likely to use ORS, and zinc treatment remains largely unavailable in high-mortality countries.

The stagnant low ORS coverage over the past decade indicates a widespread failure to deliver one of the most cost-effective and life-saving child survival interventions and underscores the urgent need to refocus attention and funding on diarrhea control."

Source: UNICEF - [Pneumonia and diarrhea: Tackling the deadliest diseases for the world's poorest children](#)

What Is the Treatment?

In most cases, replacing lost fluid to prevent dehydration is the only treatment necessary. (See "Preventing Dehydration" below.) Medicines that stop diarrhea may be helpful in some cases, but they are not recommended for people whose diarrhea is from a bacterial infection or parasite--stopping the diarrhea traps the organism in the intestines, prolonging the problem. Instead, doctors usually prescribe antibiotics. Viral causes are either treated with medication or left to run their course, depending on the severity and type of the virus .
Rehydration Project, Rehydrate.org



Children are more likely than adults to die from diarrhoea because they become dehydrated more quickly. Diarrhoea is also a major cause of child malnutrition.

1.35 million people in developing countries, most of them children, die every year from diarrheal diseases associated with lack of access to safe drinking water, inadequate sanitation, poor hygiene and overcrowding. 90% are children under 5, mostly in developing countries. Undernutrition is the underlying cause of a substantial proportion of all child deaths.

Infants who are fed only breastmilk during the first 6 months seldom get diarrhoea. At six months, in addition to breastmilk, complementary foods with increased feeding frequency and changes in food consistency, quantity, and diversity as the child ages.

Thousands of deaths could be averted through a combined prevention and treatment strategy — interventions such as improved mother and child nutrition, optimal [breastfeeding](#) practices; [Oral Rehydration Therapy](#) [ORT]; new [low-osmolarity formulations of ORS](#); incorporating [rotavirus vaccines](#); [zinc supplementation](#) during diarrhoea episodes; immunizing all children against measles; appropriate drug therapy; increased access to [safe clean water](#) and sanitation facilities and improved [personal and domestic hygiene](#), including keeping food and water clean and washing hands before touching food.

Families and communities are working together, with support from governments, states, corporations and non-governmental organizations, to prevent the conditions that cause diarrhoea and thereby rapidly reducing child mortality.