Child mortality

Millenium Development Goal (MDG) 4

Updated September 2011

The fourth Millennium Development Goal (MDG 4) aims to reduce the 1990 mortality rate among under-five children by two thirds. Child mortality is also closely linked to MDG 5- to improve maternal health. Since more than one third of all child deaths occur within the first month of life, providing skilled care to mothers during pregnancy, as well as during and after birth, greatly contributes to child survival. Millennium Development Goals adopted by the United Nations in 2000 aim to decrease child deaths worldwide by 2015.

Main causes of children deaths

Enlarge image
Source: Countdown to 2015 2010 Report

Key facts

- Nearly 9 million children under the age of five die every year, according to 2007 figures.
- Around 70% of these early child deaths are due to conditions that could be prevented or treated with access to simple, affordable interventions.
- Leading causes of death in under-five children are pneumonia, diarrhoea and health problems during the first month of life.
- Over one third of all child deaths are linked to malnutrition.
- Children in developing countries are ten times more likely to die before the age of five than children in developed countries.

The challenge – accelerating child survival

Latest figures show that 9.2 million children under-five are dying every year, down from over 12 million in 1990. Most of these children are dying in developing countries from preventable causes for which there are known and cost-effective interventions. Unless efforts are increased there will be little hope of averting the additional 5.4 million child deaths per year, or a reduction of two-thirds, needed to achieve Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 4 by 2015.

Key facts: uneven and insufficient progress

- More than one billion children are severely deprived of at least one of
the essential goods and services they require to survive, grow and
develop—these include nutrition, water, sanitation facilities, access to
basic health-care services, adequate shelter, education and
information. As a result almost 9.2 million children under-five die
every year. A further 3.3 million babies are stillborn.

- Most of the 25,000 children under five that die each day are
  concentrated in the world's poorest countries in sub-Saharan Africa
  and South Asia. There, the child mortality rate is 29 times greater
  than in industrialized countries: 175 deaths per 1000 children
  compared with 6 per 1000 in industrialized countries.

**Child mortality rates**

*Enlarge image*


**Causes of under-five child deaths**

Six conditions account for about 70% of all child deaths: acute lower
respiratory infections, mostly pneumonia (19%), diarrhoea (18%),
malaria (8%), measles, (4%), HIV/AIDS (3%), and neonatal conditions,
mainly pre-term birth, birth asphyxia, and infections (37%). The relative
contribution of HIV/AIDS to the total mortality of children under-five,
especially in sub-Saharan Africa, has also been increasing steadily.
Malnutrition is a factor in more than half of the children who die after the
first month of life.

**Why are death tolls still high?**

- Poor families are often unable to obtain even the most basic health
care for their children. Poor or delayed care-seeking contributes to up
to 70% of all under-five child deaths.
- Of the 12 countries where more than 20% of children die before their
  fifth birthday, nine have suffered a major armed conflict in recently.
- Countries with weak and fragile health systems have not been able to
  provide effective child survival strategies that are crucial to reduce
  under-five child deaths, and especially neonatal deaths. Basic health
  services have been lacking as well as nutrition, water supplies and
  sanitation facilities.
- Almost half a million deaths each year due to malaria in children
  under-five in sub-Saharan Africa could have been prevented with the
  use of insecticide-treated bed nets, shown to reduce under-five
  mortality rates by up to 20%

**What can be done?**

- Scaling up effective health services: more than 60% of all under-five
  child deaths can be avoided with proven, low-cost preventive care
  and treatment. Preventive care includes: continuous breast-feeding,
vaccination, adequate nutrition and, in Africa, the use of insecticide
  treated bed nets. The major causes of under-five deaths need to be
  treated rapidly: for example, with salt solutions for diarrhoea or simple
  antibiotics for pneumonia and other infections. To reach the majority
  of children who today do not have access to this care, we need more
  and better trained and equipped health workers. Families and
  communities need to know how best to bring up their children
  healthily and deal with sickness when it occurs.
• Political awareness, commitment and leadership are needed to ensure that child health receives the attention and resources needed to accelerate progress towards MDG4. Better information on the number and causes of under-five child deaths will help leaders to decide on the best course of action.

Countdown to 2015 – Tracking Progress in Maternal, Newborn and Child Survival

The Countdown to 2015 Initiative collects and analyses data from 68 countries that account for at least 95 % of maternal and child deaths, working to create an account of progress towards the achievement of MDGs 4 and 5. The Countdown Initiative has released Reports in 2005, 2008 and 2010 and produces country profiles that present coverage data for a range of key health services including:

• Contraceptive use
• Antenatal care
• Skilled attendance at delivery
• Postnatal care
• Child health
• Financial investments in MNCH
• Equity of access, health systems and policy

Coverage of essential interventions

Source: Countdown to 2015 2010 Report

Main sources for this fact-sheet
The Lancet's Child Survival Series, 2003

2005 World Health Report: Make every mother and child count

WHO Factsheet 178 - Children: reducing mortality

Related links

http://www.who.int/pmnch/media/press_materials/fs/fs_mdg4_childmortality/en/
World Health Organization - the Health MDGs
United Nations' Millennium Development Goals website
Countdown to 2015 Initiative
UNAIDS website

PMNCH Fact Sheets
PMNCH Facts: Millennium Development Goals 4 & 5
PMNCH Facts: MDG4 - Newborn death and illness
PMNCH Facts: MDG 4 - Stillbirths
PMNCH Facts: MDG 5 - Maternal mortality
PMNCH Facts: MDG 6 - HIV/AIDS and maternal, newborn & child health
  • Countdown to 2015: Taking stock of maternal, newborn and child survival, 2010
  • Countdown to 2015: Progress in reaching the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) 4 & 5, June 2008
Countdown to 2015: Funding for maternal, newborn and child health, June 2008
Countdown to 2015: Progress in reducing maternal and child deaths, June 2008