



Fact Sheet

Averting Diarrheal Disease in Young Children



PHOTO: UNICEF/HQ93-1471/ROGER LEMOYNE

With the simple home treatment of oral rehydration salts, 90 percent of child deaths from diarrhea-related dehydration can be prevented.

Egypt: A Pioneer in ORS

In 1977, diarrhea posed a serious public health problem in Egypt, causing at least half of all infant deaths (100 per 1,000 live births). The Ministry of Health introduced the National Control of Diarrheal Disease Project to promote the use of locally manufactured ORS.

Through the leadership of John Snow, Inc. (JSI), they distributed the ORS, along with information about the appropriate treatment of children with diarrhea, through public and private channels. The program reached two critical groups — mothers and health workers — using mass media (including TV) and different types of training.

The program increased the production of ORS, boosting mothers' correct use of these salts, and changing feeding behavior. Between 1982 and 1987, infant mortality declined by 36 percent, and child deaths fell by 43 percent. Deaths due to diarrhea during this period fell 82 percent among infants and 62 percent among children. Due to the reduction in diarrheal deaths between 1982 and 1989, 300,000 fewer children died in Egypt.⁷

Globally, nearly 10 million children under the age of five die every year, with the majority of deaths occurring in developing countries. Nearly 20 percent of these deaths — 2.2 million — are due to mostly preventable diarrheal disease from unsafe water and lack of basic sanitation and hygiene.¹ This represents about 4,500 children dying every day — more than the number of children who die from malaria, AIDS, and TB combined.²

Children in developing countries suffer from an average of three episodes of diarrhea every year, and nearly 20 out of every 1,000 die of diarrhea-related dehydration before they reach their second birthday.³ Diarrhea results in 1 billion episodes of illness every year, and in some regions, it accounts for more than 30 percent of all hospital admissions of children.⁴ Ongoing bouts with diarrhea can also result in diminished productivity and missed opportunities for education.

Virtually all child deaths associated with diarrhea from dehydration can be avoided through proven and effective solutions, such as the improved availability and use of oral rehydration therapy (ORT). ORT can prevent about 90 percent of child deaths from dehydration. This simple, cost effective treatment can be given at home using either packets of oral rehydration salts (ORS), which cost about 10 cents each; or a home solution of sugar, salt, and water.⁵

Diarrhea can also be prevented through exclusive breastfeeding, improved weaning practices, measles immunization, increasing the availability of clean water, and improving sanitation and hygiene.⁶ Low-cost, simple, and straightforward approaches such as these, along with access to good primary health care for mother and newborn, could save millions of lives each year.

For more information, visit us at www.child-survival.org.

1 Kosek, Margaret, Caryn Bern, and Richard L. Guerrant. "The Global Burden of Diarrheal Disease, as Estimated from Studies Published Between 1992 and 2000." *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 81, No. 3 (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2003): 197-204.

2 UNICEF. "Water, Environment and Sanitation – Children and Water Global Statistics." http://www.unicef.org/emailarticle/wes/index_31600.rhtml, viewed on May 21, 2007.

3 Kosek, et al. 2003.

4 Ibid.

5 UNICEF and WHO. 2006. "Diarrheal Disease." <http://www.childinfo.org/eddb/Diarrhoea/index.htm>, viewed on May 25, 2007.

6 Ibid.

7 Ruth Levine and the What Works Working Group with Molly Kinder. *Millions Saved: Proven Successes in Global Health* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Global Development, 2004): 65-72. See also <http://www.jsi.com>.