Health and Immunization

Every day, 14,000 children under age five die from things we can prevent.

Maternal and Child Health Around the World

Over the past 20 years, great progress has been made in preventing the deaths of children under five. Between 1990 and 2019, the number of children who died before their fifth birthday declined dramatically by 59%. But the progress has not been universal. The vast majority of child deaths still occur in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia as well as in poor households worldwide. In 2019, 1 in 13 children in sub-Saharan Africa died before reaching their fifth birthday – 15 times higher than the risk for children born in high-income countries.

Despite immense progress in child survival, 28 percent of all under-5 deaths are still accounted for by pneumonia, diarrhea and malaria. Low-cost, proven solutions like oral rehydration salts used to treat life-threatening diarrhea and insecticide-treated mosquito nets to prevent malaria are not readily available for every child who is in need of them.

Meanwhile, millions of children lack access to quality and affordable vaccines to protect them from diseases like polio, measles and tetanus. In 2019, an estimated 2.4 million newborns died in the first month of life - approximately 6,700 every day - mostly in the first week after birth. In 2019, 19 percent of births took place without a skilled birth attendant or health care worker. Babies who do not survive their first month often perish from preventable causes such as sepsis, respiratory infections or contaminated water.

These preventable child deaths are linked to a lack of national capacity to design, implement, and maintain national health systems. Many countries still lack trained health workers, adequate supply chains, well-equipped and sanitary health facilities, and policies that meet the needs of marginalized and poor families.

UNICEF in Action

UNICEF helps shape governments’ health policies and budgets, train health care workers, and strengthen immunization and community health programs. Last year, UNICEF supported the skills enhancement of 35,840 community health workers (CHWs) in integrated immunization efforts, helping to save countless lives.
Two little girls wait to be seen by health workers in a camp for the displaced near Baghdad, Iraq. The medical center provides vaccinations, nutrition and health services to vulnerable children displaced by conflict and crisis.

Simple, proven, low-cost solutions could save millions of mothers’ and children’s lives every year. UNICEF works at the highest levels of government and with grassroots actors to ensure that every child can survive and thrive.

In 2019, UNICEF:

- Supported the vaccination of 65.7 million children with three doses of diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis (DTP)/pentavalent vaccine in 64 priority countries.
- Supported the delivery of 27.4 million live births in health facilities.

Community case management. In Mali, UNICEF helped supply 67 percent of CHWs with equipment and drugs for the Integrated Management of Neonatal and Childhood Illness in five priority regions. As a result, 742,000 cases of pneumonia were treated by CHWs or referred to health centers. UNICEF’s support to governments and communities includes:

- Scaling up maternal, newborn and child health care services
- Ensuring the availability of prenatal and postnatal obstetric and newborn care
- Promoting breastfeeding and vaccinating children against deadly diseases
- Ensuring the availability of essential medical supplies and drugs
- Increasing access to rapid diagnostic testing for deadly diseases
- Strengthening national systems to prepare and respond to health crises

2019 UNICEF Health and Immunization Snapshot

In 2019, UNICEF:

- Improved access to water, sanitation and hygiene services in 3,341 health centers.
- Supported the procurement of over 48.1 million long-lasting insecticidal nets for 33 countries and the distribution of insecticide-treated nets to 24.83 million people in 21 countries.
- Reached 41.3 million children in emergencies with life-saving measles vaccines. The majority of these children (33 million) were located in just eight countries, including 20 million children in the war-torn Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen.
- Supported the provision of insecticide-treated nets to 53 percent of children in malaria-endemic countries.
- UNICEF responded to 74 health emergencies worldwide that included Ebola virus disease (EVD) in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, cholera in ten countries, Zika in four countries and measles in nine countries.

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