

News and Public Information

Fact Sheet

Healthcare-Associated Infections

Scale and Cost

- Hundreds of millions of patients are affected by healthcare-associated infections every year. These infections contribute to patient deaths and disability as well as to the spread of multi-resistant pathogens.
- At any given time, more than 1.4 million people worldwide are suffering from infections acquired in healthcare settings.
- In developing countries, 4,384 children die every day of healthcare-associated infections, equating to a plane crashing every hour.
- An estimated 5–10 percent of patients admitted to modern hospitals in the developed world acquire one or more infections.
- The risk of healthcare-associated infection in developing countries is 2 to 20 times higher than in developed countries. In some developing countries, the proportion of patients affected by a healthcare-acquired infection can exceed 25 percent.
- In the United States, 1 out of every 136 hospital patients becomes seriously ill as a result of a hospital-acquired infection. This is equivalent to 2 million cases and about 80,000 deaths per year—or 200 people every day.
- In Mexico, an estimated 450,000 cases of healthcare-associated infection cause 32 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants each year.
- Healthcare-associated infection is one of the leading causes of premature mortality in some countries.

Areas of Care

- In intensive care, healthcare-associated infection affects about 30 percent of patients and accounts for up to 44 percent of patient deaths.
- In Brazil and Indonesia, more than half of the babies housed in neonatal units are affected by health care-associated infection, with a fatality rate ranging from 12 percent to 52 percent.
- The infection rate associated with vascular devices among neonates is 3 to 20 times higher in developing countries than in developed countries.
- Unsafe blood transfusions cause some 16 million hepatitis B infections, 5 million hepatitis C infections, and 160,000 cases of HIV worldwide each year.

- The greatest risk of healthcare-associated transmission of hepatitis B virus takes place from patients to personnel. Yet hepatitis B vaccine is not available to immunize healthcare workers in the majority of developing countries.
- Surgical site infection accounts for about 25 percent of healthcare-associated infections.
- In 2000, reuse of contaminated syringes in developing and transitional countries caused an estimated 21 million hepatitis B virus infections (33 percent of new infections), 2 million hepatitis C infections (40 percent of new infections), and 96,000 HIV infections (2 percent of new infections).
- In some parts of the world, up to 96 percent of people seeking primary health care receive injections. Over 70 percent of these are unnecessary or could be replaced by an oral formulation.
- By the end of 2003, following implementation of WHO interventions, 55 percent of non-industrialized countries reported the use of auto-disable syringes.
- 1.8 million people die every year from diarrheal diseases. Hygiene education and promotion of hand washing can lead to a reduction of diarrheal cases by more than 50 percent.

Sources: Global Patient Safety Challenge data, 2005

WHO Guidelines on Hand Hygiene in Health Care (Advanced Draft), 2005