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WASHING HANDS TO SAVE NEWBORN LIVES IN ASIA AND AFRICA

Synthesis of Qualitative Research on the Handwashing Behavior of Mothers and Others Close to Newborns



Maternal handwashing may prevent 60% of neonatal deaths. However, information about whether and why mothers do or do not wash their hands is sparse.

The Maternal, Newborn and Child Health Integrated Program (MCHIP) and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) funded several studies to understand the drivers of maternal handwashing to address this important data gap as part of ongoing efforts to reduce neonatal mortality.

Qualitative studies were carried out in Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Kenya, in urban and rural areas among mothers, family members, and traditional and skilled birth attendants.

The studies identified numerous barriers and motivators/facilitators related to handwashing among mothers:

Barriers to Handwashing Reported by Mothers

- I am so busy that I cannot wash my hands.
- I cannot always purchase soap when I need it.
- I cannot always afford soap.
- I don't have soap and water where I need them, which makes handwashing inconvenient.
- Elders may tease me for trying to wash my hands more frequently. I cannot ask my in-laws to wash their hands.
- If I don't have assistance for chores or childcare, I cannot make handwashing a priority.
- Handwashing among mothers of newborns is not a habit.
- If I come into contact with water too frequently, my baby will get sick with cold.

Description of Participants

- Number of mothers per study: 26 to 32
- Age of mothers: 15 to 39 years
- Mothers in Indonesia had highest education; mothers in Bangladesh were least educated
- Water sources in close proximity in Bangladesh and Indonesia, within 30 minutes in Kenya

Motivators/Facilitators of Handwashing Reported by Mothers

- Newborns are vulnerable.
- Handwashing prevents illness.
- Handwashing is a modern behavior.
- I can change behaviors to help my baby grow.
- Reminders from elders help me to remember to wash.
- Handwashing increases comfort, removes disgusting materials from the hands.
- Good mothers keep themselves and their babies clean.



Conclusions

Life for a new mother is busy. Convenience, comfort, a desire to nurture the newborn, and reminder cues are common motivators of mothers' handwashing during the newborn period. In addition, the encouragement of others close to the mother, including family and birth attendants, can influence her to wash her hands."

Handwashing programs need to provide practical, feasible recommendations for handwashing that are realistic and understand the mother's environment. For example:

- Soap and water where the mother spends time with the baby increases convenience and promotes handwashing.
- Consider alternatives to bar soap: soapy water is less expensive than bar soap; waterless hand sanitizer is portable.
- Address the influencers of mothers' handwashing behavior. Take care not to foster traditions that affect women adversely.
- Consider promotion of a waterless hand cleanser, since birth attendants are often in a hurry and may not have access to soap and water where needed.
- Promote hand hygiene as the professionally responsible choice. Birth attendants serve as role models.



- By Pavani Ram and Ian Moise

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