

POUNDS OF PREVENTION

- A Disaster Risk Reduction Story -

"Pounds of Prevention" is a series of short articles that illustrate how disaster risk reduction works and why it is important. Take a behind-the-scenes look at aid work in action, long before the disaster occurs. How is that possible? Read on!

FOCUS: WEST AFRICA CHOLERA

Disaster risk reduction addresses not only natural hazards like earthquakes and droughts but also dangers like disease epidemics. Prevention of and early response to outbreaks are critical to saving lives and reducing the economic toll these disasters take.

One communicable disease, cholera, affects millions of people worldwide each year. Cholera is an infection caused by consuming food or water contaminated with a bacterium found in the feces of a person or animal with the illness. In some people, it produces symptoms like watery diarrhea and vomiting, which can lead to rapid dehydration and death in severe cases. In West Africa, it often appears during rainy seasons when the risk for transmitting waterborne diseases rises.

Although cholera may be life-threatening, prevention of the disease is usually straightforward if proper sanitation practices are followed. In many vulnerable areas, however, poor access to safe drinking water and sanitation services increases the likelihood that people will be exposed to cholera. In order to tackle cholera and prevent epidemics, USAID and partners in the United Nations (U.N.) and civil society are working with citizens and public health officials to prevent transmission and prepare for fast, effective responses to outbreaks.

In West Africa, USAID has invested in addressing cholera at a regional level by providing financial resources to scientists to study past epidemics. With more information on the underlying causes of disease transmission and environmental factors associated with the life-cycle of cholera, public health officials can develop plans that include training of specialized water, sanitation, and hygiene response teams as well as pre-positioning supplies in high-risk areas. USAID, the U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF), and partners in government, academia, and civil society have also worked to strengthen cross-border experience-sharing between decision makers in neighboring countries.

More recently, USAID has supported UNICEF's West Africa regional emergency rapid response mechanism to aid the timely delivery of emergency relief supplies and increase the number of technical staff to oversee responses to emergencies. Likewise, USAID has continued its efforts to provide water, sanitation, and hygiene training for local organizations and to improve coordination between public health and non-governmental, humanitarian organizations to better target, prevent, and control outbreaks.

Because knowing the right information about cholera is critical to stopping the disease and keeping people healthy, many specific activities center around public awareness and education campaigns. Using the radio, flyers, and even door-to-door visits, community health workers teach their neighbors about areas of possible cholera contamination, proper hand-washing and sanitation practices, and how to sterilize water either by boiling or chlorination. Helping authorities set up early warning and reporting systems is also critical to containing cholera epidemics rapidly. In addition, once an outbreak has occurred, proper disposal of waste and treatment of sewage are important to stop disease spread.

Despite cholera's entrenched position in West Africa, USAID is proud of its work to limit the disease's impact through programs that identify risk factors, strengthen the response capacity of national partners and governments, promote good hygiene, and improve access to safe water and sanitation services.



Hand-washing is a simple and effective way to disrupt the transmission of cholera. Photo by Ronald Mortensen, USAID.