

IT'S NOT JUST COVID-19:

HEALTHCARE FACILITIES ALWAYS REQUIRE WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the absence of, and overwhelming need for, water and soap and the ability to wash hands in all settings, particularly healthcare facilities. The importance of improving sustainable access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) cannot be overstated. But what can be overstated is making COVID-19 the only rationale for such improvement.

Handwashing with soap and safe water is the first line of defense against dozens of infectious illnesses and diseases and the foundation for infection prevention and control in every hospital and health clinic. Every facility without adequate WASH is an ongoing emergency, whether or not the world is facing a pandemic.

Before COVID-19 struck, UN Secretary-General Guterres and WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros [summoned the world to action](#), elevating WASH in healthcare facilities among the [top global health priorities](#) just weeks before a new virus was discovered in Wuhan, China.

As the world focuses on handwashing to fight COVID-19, the pandemic [exposes clear weaknesses](#) in the foundation of our health systems – in particular, the unavailability and poor sustainability of WASH services in healthcare facilities in low- and middle-income countries.

We must remember the important role soap and water play in the prevention of countless diseases. Constricted focus on COVID-19 threatens to undercut the fundamental urgency of WASH improvements once a vaccine is widely distributed.

Healthcare facilities urgently need adequate and sustainable WASH in order to:

- **[Ensure Infection Prevention & Control](#).** Healthcare acquired infections (HAIs) kill more people and poor hygiene conditions contribute to that as [1 in every 10 hospitalized](#) patients worldwide obtains a HAI. Across the world, in and out of healthcare facilities, inadequate WASH spreads pathogens that cause or impact dozens of illnesses and diseases—among them typhoid, cholera, trachoma, dysentery, and parasitic intestinal worms.
- **[Provide Quality Maternal and Child Health services](#).** Each year millions of women in the Least Developed Countries give birth in healthcare facilities without adequate WASH, where pathogens are transmitted via unwashed hands, contaminated beds, unsafe water and dirty instruments. One million deaths annually are associated with unclean births, while infections account for [26% of neonatal mortality](#) and [11% of maternal mortality](#). Poor WASH conditions also [deter women](#) from seeking maternity services in healthcare facilities with trained staff.
- **[Combat Antimicrobial Resistance](#).** Preventing infections in healthcare facilities through WASH reduces the misuse and overuse of antibiotics, thereby reducing antimicrobial resistance (AMR). Infections acquired in healthcare facilities are [a major driver](#) of AMR globally. AMR is pushing us to the dangerous day when many antibiotics will no longer be effective.
- **[Prepare For the Next Outbreak](#).** Learning from this unprecedented pandemic that has jeopardized the lives of patients and healthcare workers, it is self-evident that healthcare facilities need improved WASH to prevent and contain outbreaks before they turn into pandemics. Water, Sanitation and Hygiene must be considered critical components of PPE in every healthcare facility.

It is critical that COVID-19 be a catalyst for integrated and sustainable WASH and health systems strengthening in order to ensure safe, quality healthcare for everyone, everywhere.

*"A healthcare facility without WASH is NOT a healthcare facility."
– Dr. Maria Neira, World Health Organization*