

IT'S NOT JUST COVID-19:

HEALTHCARE FACILITIES ALWAYS REQUIRE WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted once again the need for handwashing in all settings, particularly healthcare facilities.

Yet the lesson can be forgotten too quickly. A [recent study](#) in one U.S. hospital reveals that while the COVID-19 threat temporarily increased handwashing compliance by doctors, nurses and cleaning staff to 100%, compliance returned to pre-pandemic levels of just 50% within four months.

Handwashing with soap and water is the first line of defense against more than a dozen infectious diseases and remains the foundation for infection prevention and control in every hospital and clinic.

While some medical staff fail to wash hands when they could do so, **the dilemma in many hospitals and clinics is an absence of water and soap in the first place:** [half of all healthcare facilities in the Least Developed Countries](#) lack adequate water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH).

Before COVID-19 struck, UN Secretary-General António Guterres and WHO Director-General Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus [summoned the world to action](#), elevating WASH in healthcare facilities to among the [top global health priorities](#).

The COVID-19 pandemic [exposes yet again clear weaknesses](#) in the foundation of our health systems. As the world fights COVID-19, we must remember the fundamental role of WASH in the prevention of disease.

Any healthcare facility without adequate WASH is in an ongoing emergency, whether or not the world is facing a pandemic.

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

- **[Ensure Infection Prevention & Control](#)**. Unhygienic conditions contribute to the burden of healthcare-acquired infections, which impact [1 in every 10 hospitalized](#) patients worldwide. Without WASH, you cannot prevent the spread pathogens in the environment—among them those that cause 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 should all be considered critical components of PPE for a 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.