

UNICEF Fact Sheet: Potential Disease Threats

Three to five million people throughout the tsunami-affected region face fundamental health risks and challenges to their survival – at least one-third of them children.

Without immediate, wide-scale action to provide safe water, sanitation and essential medicines, the affected populations will be at grave risk of diarrhoeal, respiratory and mosquito-borne diseases. Here is basic information about these threats.

Diarrhoea kills children through dehydration and malnutrition. Diarrhoea is caused by many different germs that are swallowed, especially germs from faeces found in contaminated drinking water. Many cases of diarrhoea can be treated with oral rehydration salts (ORS).

Three deadly types of diarrhoeal disease:

Cholera is a highly infectious, severe intestinal disease that mainly affects young children. Cholera causes severe attacks of watery diarrhoea, abdominal cramps and vomiting that, without treatment, can quickly lead to acute dehydration and death. When cholera occurs in a disaster situation, up to 50 per cent of cases may die. During an epidemic, 80-90 per cent of diarrhoea patients can be treated by ORS.

Typhoid is a highly infectious bacterial infection that mainly affects children. Symptoms include headaches, high fever, nausea, diarrhoea and loss of appetite. Antibiotic treatment is the most effective way to treat typhoid.

Dysentery may be simply defined as diarrhoea containing blood and can be caused by several different organisms. It is spread from faeces, urine and contaminated water. In addition to bloody diarrhoea, dysentery often includes abdominal cramps, fever and rectal pain. 69 per cent of all cases and 61 per cent of all deaths from dysentery are of children under five.

Measles is a highly contagious airborne viral infection that weakens the immune system and makes children very susceptible to fatal complications from diarrhoea, pneumonia and malnutrition. Symptoms include fever, red eyes, achiness, cough and a red blotchy rash that appears first on the head and face and then spreads to the back, chest, arms and legs.

While there is no treatment for measles itself, a child can be protected against measles with a vaccine that costs 13 cents. ORS and vitamin A supplements can also reduce the severity of the disease. In an emergency situation, preventing a measles outbreak requires close to 100 per cent of children to be immunized. During a measles epidemic, over one-quarter of cases are fatal.

Flooding and stagnant water also create favourable conditions for mosquitoes that can transmit malaria and dengue fever. Overcrowding facilitates mosquito bites and therefore transmission.

Malaria is a serious disease spread through mosquito bites. In areas where malaria is common, it can be the leading cause of death among young children. Symptoms include fever, vomiting, drowsiness or fits. If a child with malarial fever is not treated within a day, they might die. During an epidemic, up to 20 per cent of cases are fatal.

Dengue is a severe flu-like illness that affects infants, young children and adults. Like malaria, it is also spread through mosquito bites. There is no specific-treatment for dengue fever. In Asia, dengue fever is a leading cause of hospitalization and death among children. During dengue epidemics, up to 90 per cent of the population at risk may fall ill and up to 20 per cent of cases may be fatal.