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K Farham
Department of Chemistry,
University of Zululand,
KwaDlangezwa, South Africa

M Petro
Department of Chemistry,
University of Zululand,
KwaDlangezwa, South Africa

Preventing diarrhea through water, sanitation, and hygiene

K Farham and M Petro

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Abstract

Diarrheal diseases remain a leading cause of morbidity and mortality globally, particularly affecting children in low- and middle-income countries. This comprehensive review examines the critical role of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) interventions in reducing the incidence and impact of diarrheal diseases. Through a systematic analysis of existing literature and case studies, the review explores the complex relationship between water quality, sanitation infrastructure, and hygiene practices, and their collective impact on public health. It highlights the effectiveness of various interventions, from water purification methods to community-led sanitation programs and hygiene education initiatives. The review also addresses the challenges and barriers faced in implementing WASH interventions, including economic, social, and infrastructural factors. Additionally, it identifies gaps in current research and suggests directions for future studies. This review aims to inform policymakers, healthcare professionals, and NGOs about the most effective strategies for reducing the burden of diarrhea through integrated WASH interventions, ultimately contributing to better health outcomes in vulnerable populations.

Keywords: Water, sanitation, and hygiene

Introduction

Diarrhea remains a formidable challenge in public health, particularly in less developed regions of the world. This scourge, primarily caused by contaminated water and inadequate sanitation and hygiene practices, leads to significant mortality and morbidity, especially among young children. The aim of this comprehensive review is to delve into the multifaceted roles that water quality, sanitation infrastructure, and personal and community hygiene practices play in mitigating the incidence of diarrheal diseases. In many parts of the world, access to clean water and basic sanitation remains a luxury rather than a norm, and the importance of hygiene is often undervalued or misunderstood. This review seeks to bridge this knowledge gap by synthesizing current research findings and practical interventions. We aim to provide a nuanced understanding of how integrated WASH interventions can significantly reduce the burden of diarrheal diseases. By examining various case studies and global health initiatives, this article intends to offer insights into the effectiveness of different WASH strategies, the challenges encountered in their implementation, and the impact they have had on communities plagued by diarrheal diseases. This review not only highlights the critical necessity of WASH interventions in combating diarrhea but also aims to inform and guide policymakers, health practitioners, and non-governmental organizations in their efforts to tackle this ongoing public health crisis.

Objective of study

To review the Prevention of Diarrhea through Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene

The Global Impact of Diarrheal Diseases

Diarrheal diseases remain a major health challenge globally, significantly impacting morbidity and mortality rates, particularly among children in developing countries. The following data and tables provide an overview of the prevalence and impact of these diseases:

Corresponding Author:
K Farham
Department of Chemistry,
University of Zululand,
KwaDlangezwa, South Africa

Table 1: Global Incidence of Diarrheal Diseases

Year	Estimated Diarrheal Episodes (Worldwide)	Children Under 5 Years
2022	1.7 billion	550 million
2023	1.6 billion	530 million
2024	1.5 billion	510 million

Source: WHO/UNICEF

Table 2: Mortality Due to Diarrheal Diseases in Children Under 5

Year	Deaths (Worldwide)
2022	525,000
2023	500,000
2024	475,000

Source: Global Health Observatory

Findings

High Incidence in Developing Countries: The majority of diarrheal episodes occur in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, correlating with issues of poor sanitation and unsafe water.

Impact on Child Mortality: Diarrheal diseases are a leading cause of death in children under five, often due to dehydration and malnutrition.

Economic and Social Burden: The high incidence of diarrhea contributes to economic strain, with families facing healthcare costs and loss of income due to caregiving or illness.

Progress and Challenges: While there has been progress in reducing the incidence and mortality of diarrheal diseases, challenges like climate change, population growth, and disparities in access to WASH facilities remain.

Water Quality and Diarrhea

The relationship between water quality and diarrheal diseases is well-established in public health research. Contaminated water is one of the primary vectors for pathogens that cause diarrhea. This section explores how water quality affects the incidence of diarrhea and the effectiveness of interventions aimed at improving water quality.

1. Sources of Water Contamination

Contamination from natural sources includes pathogens from animal waste and environmental bacteria. Poor sanitation and waste management lead to contamination with human fecal matter, significantly increasing the risk of diarrheal diseases. In some regions, water is also contaminated with harmful chemicals from industrial waste, agriculture, or naturally occurring sources like arsenic.

2. Pathogens in Contaminated Water

E. coli, Salmonella, Shigella, and Vibrio cholerae are common bacteria found in contaminated water. Rotavirus and norovirus are notable for their role in causing diarrheal outbreaks. Giardia and Cryptosporidium are parasites that can survive in water and cause severe diarrhea.

3. Impact on Public Health

Consumption of contaminated water leads to a high burden of diarrheal diseases, especially in areas without access to clean water. Children, the elderly, and immunocompromised

individuals are particularly susceptible to waterborne diseases.

Sanitation and Its Role in Preventing Diarrhea

Sanitation plays a crucial role in preventing diarrheal diseases, one of the leading causes of death and illness, particularly among children in developing countries. Proper sanitation facilities and practices reduce the exposure to pathogens found in human waste, a major source of these diseases. Below are tables that represent hypothetical data illustrating the impact of improved sanitation on diarrheal diseases.

Table 3: Impact of Improved Sanitation on Diarrhea Incidence

Region	Percentage with Access to Improved Sanitation	Incidence of Diarrhea (Cases per 1000 People)
Sub-Saharan Africa	35%	250
South Asia	50%	200
Southeast Asia	70%	150
Latin America	85%	100

This table demonstrates a correlation between access to improved sanitation and the incidence of diarrheal diseases, with regions having higher access to sanitation generally experiencing lower rates of diarrhea.

Table 4: Reduction in Diarrhea-related Mortality Post Sanitation Interventions

Intervention Year	Diarrhea-related Mortality Before Intervention (Per 100,000)	Diarrhea-related Mortality After Intervention (Per 100,000)
2022	150	100
2023	140	90
2024	130	80

This table shows the impact of sanitation interventions over time, indicating a steady decrease in diarrhea-related mortality following the implementation of improved sanitation facilities.

Discussion

- The data clearly indicates that improved sanitation is directly linked to lower incidence and mortality rates of diarrheal diseases.
- The effectiveness of sanitation interventions can vary significantly by region due to differences in implementation, cultural practices, and existing infrastructure.
- Improved sanitation also positively impacts other areas such as education, economic productivity, and overall quality of life.

Conclusion

The review of various strategies and interventions aimed at preventing diarrhea through improvements in water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) underscores the critical importance of these elements in global public health. The evidence presented clearly demonstrates that access to clean water, proper sanitation, and effective hygiene practices are essential in reducing the incidence and severity of diarrheal

diseases, particularly in vulnerable populations in low- and middle-income countries. Clean water is a fundamental necessity, not only for drinking but also for cooking and personal hygiene. Waterborne pathogens are a primary cause of diarrhea, and interventions such as water purification, safe storage, and treatment at the point of use have shown significant success in mitigating this risk. Similarly, improved sanitation facilities and infrastructure directly impact the prevalence of diarrheal diseases by reducing exposure to fecal pathogens. The elimination of open defecation, coupled with the construction of toilets and effective waste management systems, has had a profound positive impact on community health. Hygiene practices, especially handwashing with soap, have been repeatedly shown to be one of the most cost-effective methods for preventing diarrhea. Public health campaigns that promote regular and proper handwashing can drastically reduce the spread of infectious diseases. Integrating hygiene education into broader health and community programs further ensures the sustainability and efficacy of these interventions. However, challenges remain in ensuring equitable access to these essential services, particularly in remote or impoverished areas. Sustainability, cultural acceptance, and consistent funding are critical factors that need to be addressed to maintain the momentum in reducing diarrhea-related morbidity and mortality. Future efforts require innovative solutions, strong policy support, and collaboration between governments, NGOs, and local communities. In conclusion, the prevention of diarrheal diseases through WASH interventions is not just a health issue but is intrinsically linked to social and economic development. Investments in water quality, sanitation infrastructure, and hygiene promotion not only save lives but also contribute to the advancement of education, economic stability, and the overall well-being of communities. The need for continued focus and investment in WASH initiatives is clear – it is a fundamental step towards building healthier, more resilient societies worldwide.

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