Improving the health of mothers

Worldwide, more than 50 million women suffer from poor reproductive health and serious pregnancy-related illness and disability. And every year more than 500,000 women die from complications of pregnancy and childbirth. Most of the deaths occur in Asia, but the risk of dying is highest in Africa.

Women in high-fertility countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have a 1-in-16 lifetime risk of dying from maternal causes, compared with women in low-fertility countries in Europe, who have a 1-in-2,000 risk of dying, and in North America, who have a 1-in-3,500 risk.

High maternal mortality rates in many countries are the result of inadequate reproductive health care for women. Compounding the risks that high fertility poses to maternal health are poorly timed and inadequately spaced births. Even where fertility rates are low, the timing and spacing of pregnancies and the extent to which the births are wanted warrant attention. Contraception to limit, space, or time pregnancies can help reduce these risks to maternal health.

Why do mothers die?

The higher rates of maternal mortality throughout much of the developing world are the result of serious neglect of women’s reproductive health, particularly for the poorest women, as well as ineffective interventions. Maternal deaths reflect the disparities between the standing of men and women in society and the inequities in access to education, health, and nutrition resources.

Recent progress on maternal health in developing countries has been mixed, with maternal mortality rates remaining fairly constant globally. Greater access to family planning can reduce the maternal mortality rate by reducing the number of pregnancies.

In addition to contraception, women need access to a broad range of services. The primary means of preventing maternal deaths is to provide rapid access to emergency obstetrical care, including treatment of hemorrhage, infection, hypertension, and obstructed labor. It is also important to have a midwife, nurse, or doctor present at every delivery. In developing countries only about half of deliveries are attended by professional health staff.

Skilled attendants must be supported by the right environment. Life-saving interventions—such as antibiotics, surgery, and transportation to medical centers—are unavailable to many women, especially in rural areas. These women may lack the money for health care and transport, or they may simply lack their husbands’ permission to seek care.

Mothers in developing countries still lack adequate health services

Coverage of maternal health services, 1997 (%)  

- Skilled attendants at delivery
- Antenatal care
- Postpartum care

Sub-Saharan Africa suffers the greatest number of maternal deaths

Number of women who die during pregnancy and childbirth, 2000 (per 100,000 live births)
Women need access to a broad range of medical services to reduce maternal deaths

Causes of maternal mortality worldwide, most recent year available

- Severe bleeding: 24%
- Infection: 15%
- Unsafe abortion: 13%
- Other direct causes: 8%
- Eclampsia: 12%
- Obstructed labor: 12%

Contraceptive use is much lower in the Middle East and Africa

World Bank Atlas

The total fertility rate, the number of children a woman will bear in her lifetime, has important consequences for maternal health. In high-fertility countries a woman risks pregnancy-related death many times during her reproductive lifetime.