



PNEUMONIA

THE FORGOTTEN
KILLER OF
CHILDREN

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Pneumonia: The forgotten killer of children

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PNEUMONIA KILLS MORE CHILDREN THAN ANY OTHER ILLNESS – MORE THAN AIDS, MALARIA AND MEASLES COMBINED. OVER 2 MILLION CHILDREN DIE FROM PNEUMONIA EACH YEAR, ACCOUNTING FOR ALMOST 1 IN 5 UNDER-FIVE DEATHS WORLDWIDE. YET, LITTLE ATTENTION IS PAID TO THIS DISEASE.

This report examines the epidemiological evidence on the burden and distribution of pneumonia and assesses current levels of treatment and prevention. The results are sobering: Only about 1 in 5 caregivers knows the danger signs of pneumonia; only about half of children sick with pneumonia receive appropriate medical care; and, according to the limited data available, less than 20 per cent of children with pneumonia received antibiotics, the recommended treatment.

Effective interventions to reduce pneumonia deaths are available, but reach too few children. Scaling up treatment coverage is possible, and at relatively low cost. Estimates suggest that if antibiotic treatment were universally delivered to children with pneumonia, around 600,000 lives could be saved each year, at a cost of \$600 million.¹ Furthermore, the number of lives saved could more than double to 1.3 million if both prevention and treatment interventions to reduce pneumonia deaths were universally delivered.

Our hope is that this report will raise awareness about this neglected disease and will serve as a call to action to reduce child deaths from pneumonia.

INTRODUCTION

GLOBAL GOALS AND TARGETS FOR REDUCING CHILD MORTALITY AND PNEUMONIA DEATHS

Reducing child mortality is one of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which are the world's time-bound targets for reducing poverty in its various dimensions by 2015. Specifically, Goal 4 calls for reducing under-five mortality by two thirds between 1990 and 2015. Achieving the MDG on child mortality will require urgent action to reduce childhood pneumonia deaths, which account for 19 per cent of all under-five deaths.

Millennium Development Goals

- Goal 4: Reduce child mortality *Reduce by two thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate.*

A World Fit for Children – Plan of Action: Goals, Strategies and Actions

- *Reduce by one third deaths due to acute respiratory infection between 2000 and 2010 (section III.B.1, para. 37).*

COUNTING UNDER-FIVE DEATHS FROM PNEUMONIA

Figure 1 presents the global distribution of the primary causes of all under-five deaths and shows that pneumonia kills more children than any other illness – accounting for 19 per cent of all under-five deaths (*see the Appendix for more detailed information on these estimates of cause-specific mortality*).

This figure, however, does not include deaths due to pneumonia during the first four weeks of life, the neonatal period. It has been estimated that 26 per cent of neonatal deaths, or 10 per cent of all under-five deaths, are caused by severe infections during the neonatal period. And a significant proportion of these infections is caused by pneumonia/sepsis (sepsis is a serious blood-borne bacterial infection that is also treated with antibiotics). If these deaths were included in the overall estimate, pneumonia would account for up to 3 million, or as many as one third (29 per cent), of under-five deaths each year.

FIGURE 1 PNEUMONIA IS THE LEADING KILLER OF CHILDREN WORLDWIDE

Global distribution of cause-specific mortality among children under five, 2004

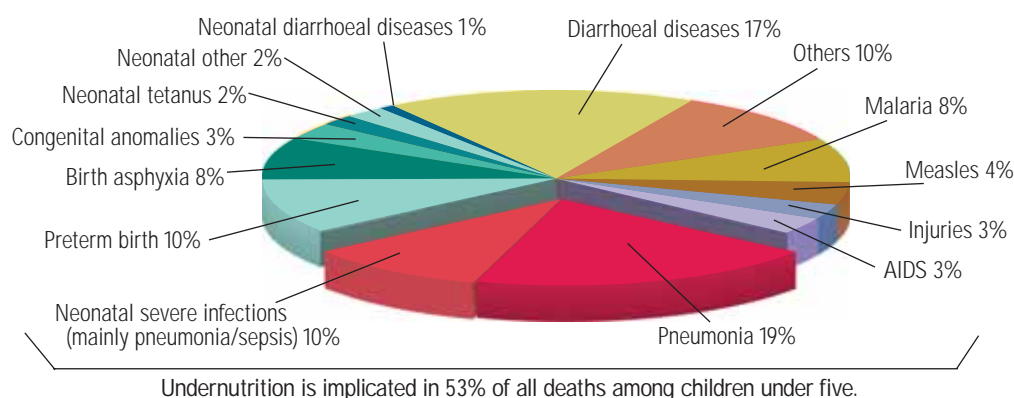
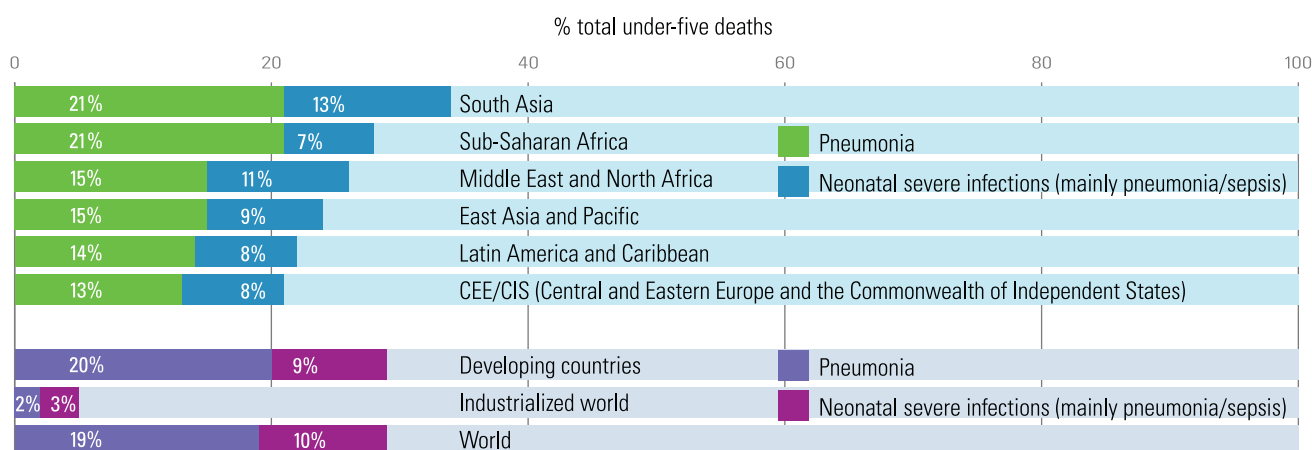


FIGURE 2 PNEUMONIA IS A MAJOR CAUSE OF CHILD DEATHS IN EVERY REGION

% under-five deaths due to pneumonia, by UNICEF region, 2004





BACKGROUND

ON PNEUMONIA

Acute respiratory infections can occur in any part of the respiratory system, from the middle ear to the nose to the lungs.² Pneumonia is a severe form of acute lower respiratory infection that specifically affects the lungs.

The lungs are composed of thousands of tubes (bronchi) that subdivide into smaller airways (bronchioles), which end in small sacs (alveoli). The alveoli contain capillaries where oxygen is added to the blood and carbon dioxide is removed. When a person has pneumonia, pus and fluid fill the alveoli in one or both lungs, which interferes with oxygen absorption, making breathing difficult.

Most acute respiratory infections result in mild illnesses, such as the common cold. But in vulnerable children, infections that begin with mild symptoms may sometimes lead to more severe illnesses, such as pneumonia – especially when they coincide with other illnesses. The

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