

REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Reproductive health relates to the biological function of having children. But it is not just about the physical health of our reproductive system (the internal and external organs that together make reproduction possible). It is also a “state of complete physical, mental and social well-being in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes”, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). Reproductive health is considered a basic right which everyone has, whatever their gender, sexuality and age. “Reproductive age” is generally defined as being from 15 to 49 years of age.

Reproductive health is a very broad subject. The issues and topics most relevant for our work include:

- Children are not married too young and can wait until they are emotionally and physically ready to have sex.
- People are able to plan their families to support their health and wellbeing (see Family Planning below).
- **Sex and relationships.** A key issue is enabling people to have a safe, consensual and satisfying sex life. This means, for example, that:
 - People are able to make informed decisions, based on accurate information, about sex and relationships.
 - Sex never occurs through force, rape or duty.
 - People are able to prevent and treat sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).
- **Maternal health.** Work around maternal health aims to support women’s ability to access appropriate healthcare services that give them the best chance of having a safe pregnancy and giving birth safely to a healthy child. The issues we cover include:
 - Supporting women to have the recommended number of four antenatal check-ups, to give birth safely with a skilled birth attendant and to receive postnatal care.

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- Supporting women to have a healthy pregnancy, for example, by eating nutritiously, taking enough rest and not carrying out hard labour.
- Prevention of mother to child transmission of STIs and HIV. (Please see the Maternal Health fact sheet in the ringbinder for more details).

Family planning. This enables people to decide, of their own accord, if, when and how many children to have. This means:

- Access to, and ability to use, their choice of safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of family planning and fertility regulation.
- Preventing adolescent pregnancy (Please see the Family Planning fact sheet in your ringbinder for more details).

Female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C). The practice of removing part or all of female external genitalia in young girls can have long-term consequences for a woman's reproductive health. For example, it increases the risk to mother and baby of death and injury during childbirth, as well as long-term psychological harm and potential illness. It also makes sex more difficult and painful.

Fertility. This includes treatment for problems affecting people's ability to conceive a child (infertility), cancers that affect the male and female reproductive systems and managing the menopause.

Services and information. People have a right to access information and services that fully support all of the above.

WHY DO WE WORK ON REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH?

Improving reproductive health can reduce illness and death rates among all population groups, but particularly adolescent girls, women and newborn babies. Good reproductive health can improve the health, well-being and economic productivity of families, communities and societies. Globally:

- Some 800 women die every day from preventable causes relating to pregnancy and childbirth. Ninety-nine per cent of these deaths are in developing countries.
- Some 45% of pregnant women do not have the minimum recommended number of antenatal (ANC) check-ups during pregnancy. ANC can prevent unnecessary death and disability among women and newborns.
- Although worldwide between 2005 and 2012, 70% of women delivered with a skilled health worker present, in low-income countries this was only 47%, compared with 99% in upper middle-income countries.

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222 MILLION WOMEN WOULD LIKE TO AVOID PREGNANCY BUT CAN'T.



- There are 222 million women who would like to avoid getting pregnant but can't because they don't have access to any modern methods of family planning.
- More than one million people acquire a sexually transmitted infection (STI) every day. STIs can have very serious long-term health consequences, resulting in life-threatening conditions, such as cancers and AIDS.
- About 140 million girls and women are currently living with the consequences of FGM/C. An estimated three million girls (most under 15) are cut every year.
- The need to analyse and fully understand particular sensitivities in your country. These may differ between different age groups, gender and social groups. They will also depend on your target audience. Also, be aware that your own attitudes may well be influencing your judgements and decisions.
- Different age groups are at different stages of the reproductive cycle. Therefore they have different needs. For example, even though reproductive age is defined as 15 to 49 years old, boys and girls may become fertile and have the ability to reproduce from as young as 10 to 12 years old. A programme for young children will be very different from one for adolescents or one for adults.

THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN WORKING ON REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH ISSUES

Many issues relating to reproductive health, such as sex and relationships, FGM/C and family planning, are sensitive. This can bring challenges for our work. Religious beliefs, traditions, politics and shyness around very personal sexual issues all influence people's attitudes, behaviour and norms, and affect our approach and how we work. When developing work around reproductive health, bear the following in mind:

- The foundation for improving reproductive health is improving knowledge about reproduction itself. It is important to find out what our audiences know about basic biology, what happens during puberty, the menstrual cycle and so forth.
- Some reproductive health needs, for example those relating to testing and treating of STIs, or treatment for infertility, or family planning are

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dependent on specialist services and products that may not exist in the area in which you are working. It is very important that information in our projects is tailored to the services and products available to our audiences.. At the same time, we can support communities to hold decision makers and service providers to account, to increase the supply of services and products.

Reproductive health is not just a women's issue. In countries where we work, men often make the decisions around sex and reproduction and whether or not women and children can access health services. Men and boys also have their own reproductive rights and needs. It is important to include men!

RESOURCES

The information in this fact sheet is drawn from the sources below. If you want to find out more about the issues that have been covered, please refer to them. Or you can ask BBC Media Action's London-based health advisors. If you are working in a country where there are high rates of HIV, it is important to be aware that this will have an important influence on work around reproductive health and you will need to seek specific advice.

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND STATISTICS

COUNTDOWN TO 2015 – MATERNAL, NEWBORN AND CHILD SURVIVAL

Multi-institutional collaboration that publishes country profiles and calls for accountability in reaching the Millennium Development Goals on child mortality and maternal health:

<http://www.countdown2015mnch.org/>
<http://www.countdown2015mnch.org/reports-and-articles/2013-report>

FACTS FOR LIFE

UNICEF handbook with essential information for families and others around maternal health and childcare:

<http://www.factsforlifeglobal.org/>

RIGHT TO REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Programme of Action from the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD):

<http://www.unfpa.org/public/icpd>
<http://icpdbeyond2014.org/>

UNFPA

United Nations Population Fund, the UN agency working to achieve universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights:

<http://www.unfpa.org/public/>

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION PUBLICATIONS, FACT SHEETS AND STATISTICS ON REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

http://www.who.int/topics/reproductive_health/en/
<http://www.who.int/gho/en/>