



BIRTH SPACING

for promoting maternal and child health in urban settings

ISSUES: In 2008, it was estimated that 58 300 women and 510 000 newborns died in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region due to complications from pregnancy and childbirth. 50% of newborn babies in the Region are still delivered away from health care facilities, and 40% of deliveries are unattended by skilled health personnel. At the same time, only 31.1% of married couples are using modern contraceptive methods to achieve optimal birth spacing, with a total fertility rate as high as 4.2 children per woman.

Parents can achieve optimal birth spacing by planning how many children they want and when they want to have them. After a birth, the recommended interval before attempting the next pregnancy is at least 2 years. This interval helps to reduce health risks for both mother and baby.

SOLUTIONS: Research-based evidence shows that the presence of skilled birth attendants at delivery and the practice of optimal birth spacing are the most effective measures to promote maternal and child health. By avoiding high risk pregnancies that are too early, too late, too close and too many, and avoiding unintentional pregnancies, birth spacing can prevent as many as one in every three maternal deaths and can significantly reduce newborn, infant and child mortality. Using contraceptives can also prevent morbidity and mortality due to AIDS and sexually transmitted infections.

Women and children are the most vulnerable groups among the underserved populations living in poor and remote suburban and slum areas, and require special attention. Community awareness about lifesaving practices in pregnancy, childbirth and home care for the newborn, literacy and female education, fertility and family formation patterns and quality of health care services are the

main factors that contribute to enhancing maternal and child health.

ACTIONS DURING 2010:

- Training of health volunteers to:
 - understand and discuss the importance and benefits of birth spacing and the use of contraceptives by eligible couples;
 - understand and discuss the importance of birth spacing during the postpartum period; and
 - raise awareness of available contraceptives and where to seek them.
- Opening up public spaces for organizing health awareness and counselling sessions in parks/public places and during town hall meetings, and conducting environmental clean-up campaigns, with special emphasis on mother and child care and birth spacing among underserved populations living in slum areas.
- Documenting success stories and good practices and selecting champions who have taken action and had a significant impact on maternal and child health in their cities.
- Constructing special local websites that provide up-to-date knowledge on birth spacing for maternal and child health and the current situation in different parts of each city.

THE WAY FORWARD: World Health Day 2010 is an opportunity to highlight the priority public health issues of maternal and child mortality in the Region. Skilled attendance in pregnancy and childbirth and birth spacing counselling and service delivery should be given special attention, especially for women in urban slums, who are more vulnerable.



World Health Day 2010
Urbanization and Health



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