

1 to 1,000:

How to ensure the health and flourishing of women, children, and society



THE FIRST 1,000 DAYS in the life of a human being—from conception to the second birthday—dramatically shape the rest of a child's life. They are also critical to the well-being of mothers.

Prioritizing this window of time will save lives, improve health, and contribute substantially to sustainable development.

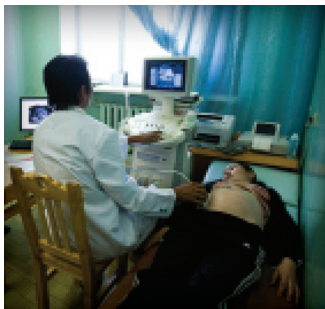
It starts with education



Healthy reproduction begins with education. Women who have a greater level of education are more likely to make the best reproductive choices, access quality maternal health care services, exclusively breastfeed their infants for the first six months of life, and ensure their children have nutritious food to eat.¹ Increasing the educational level of girls and women will lead to healthier mothers and children.²

Prenatal care is crucial

Care throughout pregnancy, including regular clinic visits, helps ensure maternal and fetal health. The nutrition a woman receives before and during pregnancy greatly affects the life of her child. As a series of papers published in *The Lancet* explains, “New evidence further reinforces the importance of the nutritional status of women at the time of conception and during pregnancy, both for the health of the mother and for ensuring healthy fetal growth and development.”³



Malnutrition can hinder development of a child’s brain and immune system, inhibiting the child’s ability to learn and making her more susceptible to disease. Malnutrition can also prevent healthy growth and lead to a low birthweight, increasing the risk of neonatal death and disability. Only a serious commitment to good maternal nutrition will stem these problems.

Preventing maternal death

An estimated 287,000 maternal deaths took place in 2020, most of them in the developing world and especially in sub-Saharan Africa and southern Asia.⁴ These deaths can be prevented with basic care before, during and after childbirth—including antenatal care and nutrition, skilled birth attendants, emergency obstetric care, sanitation and clean water.



Such measures helped lead to more than a one-third decline in maternal deaths worldwide from 2000 to 2020, according to estimates by the World Health Organization.⁵ Now they must be extended to the places where basic health care is still lacking.

Saving newborns

An estimated 2.4 million children died within the first month of life in 2020, and most of those deaths were preventable.⁶ Lives can be saved by improving the quality of health care during labor, childbirth and the days following birth, including essential newborn care. Prenatal care and nutrition are also important to ensure healthy development and prevent fetal growth restriction and low birthweight.



CONCEPTION

BIRTH

266

A mother’s nutrition prior to and throughout pregnancy helps determine the health of the child.

Quality medical care must be administered before, during and after delivery—for the sake of both mother and child.

Healthy child development

The period of early childhood is essential to healthy physical, cognitive and social-emotional development. Undernutrition is estimated to cause



3.1 million child deaths each year; suboptimum breastfeeding leads to 800,000 deaths every year.⁷

Adequate nutrition during this time can prevent stunting, wasting, vitamin deficiencies, and death. Essential vitamins and minerals and optimum breastfeeding help

children develop into healthy and productive adults.

Respecting and protecting women

Pregnant women and new mothers are uniquely vulnerable to the threat of physical and emotional abuse, especially by partners and family members.

Violence during pregnancy can also lead to pregnancy-related problems such as miscarriage and preterm birth, jeopardizing the life and health of the child.

In some regions women are frequently pressured to choose abortion or infanticide, often because the child is a girl. Measures must be taken to protect women and their children from such coercion and abuse.⁸



How to achieve sustainable development

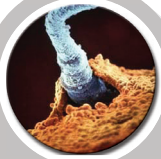
Maternal and child well-being are intimately connected. Research shows that the first 1,000 days in the life of a human being are crucial to the survival, health, and prosperity of both mother and child. Proper care throughout this period leads to healthier, better-educated,

and more-productive adults. This reduces health care costs and increases economic prosperity.

Healthy women, children, and families contribute enormously to development. The 1,000-day continuum of care for mothers and babies must be prioritized in the global development agenda.



In the womb



At fertilization (or conception), the life of a human organism—an individual member of the species *Homo sapiens*—begins.



At about three weeks after conception, the unborn child's heart begins to beat.

3 weeks



By eight weeks, most organs and systems have formed.

8 weeks



By 15 weeks, evidence shows that the unborn child can experience pain.

20 weeks

FIRST BIRTHDAY

SECOND BIRTHDAY

1000

Essential vitamins and minerals and optimal breastfeeding help a child develop into a healthy and productive adult.

The importance of maternal and child care

“The child, by reason of his physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth.”

Declaration of the Rights of the Child

“Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. ... People are the most important and valuable resource of any nation.”

Programme of Action, International Conference on Population and Development

“Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.”

“Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

References

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- 4 WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group, UNDESA/Population Division. *Trends in maternal mortality 2000 to 2020*. Geneva, WHO, 2023.
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- 8 WHO et al. *Global and regional estimates of violence against women: prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence*. Geneva, WHO, 2013.



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This publication available online in English, Spanish and French.
Download at www.mccl-go.org.

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