

# Simple solution to saving newborn lives

**Umbilical cord cleansing with 4% chlorhexidine saves newborn lives**

STAR HEALTH DESK

Each year 3.1 million newborns die globally, and infection causes more than a quarter of these deaths. In resource poor, high mortality settings, infections can account for over half of the neonatal deaths. Lack of hygiene and antiseptic at birth and in the first week of life increases the risk of deadly but preventable infections. While the World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines recommend clean and dry umbilical cord care, they also include application of topical antiseptics to the cord stump in areas with high infection risk as acceptable.

A recent community-based randomised trials in rural areas in Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan have shown that applying 4% chlorhexidine (7.1% chlor-

hexidine digluconate) to the umbilical cord stump prevents infection and saves newborn lives. These trials and concurrent research support chlorhexidine cord cleansing as an efficacious, acceptable, feasible and cost-effective newborn care intervention.

## WHO recommendations

The most recent WHO recommendations for umbilical cord care were published in 1998 and included the following:

1. Clean and dry cord care practices are recommended;
2. In settings where the risk of bacterial infection is high, it may be prudent to apply an antiseptic to the cord per local preference; and
3. With most cord care research from developed countries, additional research from developing countries is needed



PHOTO: TAREQ SALAHUDDIN

for optimal guidelines in high risk, low resource settings.

## How to apply

Immediately after cutting the cord, apply chlorhexidine to the tip of the cord, the stump and around the base of the stump. If feasible, repeat application once daily through the first week of life or until the cord separates, whichever occurs earlier.

Further benefits may be real-

ised from multiple applications including reduced local infection or improved hygiene practices.

## Key findings

In the research trials in Bangladesh revealed the following key findings.

- In the context of a basic community-based newborn care package, two regimens were compared to the standard recommendation of dry cord care:

single, first-day chlorhexidine application and 7-day chlorhexidine application;

- Single chlorhexidine application on the first day of life reduced neonatal mortality by 20%, and moderately reduced severe omphalitis, as well as cord bacterial colonisation;
- 7-day chlorhexidine application reduced severe cord infection by 65% and reduced bacterial colonisation; neonatal mortality was 6% lower in this group. Despite high statistical power, the study still had a 20% chance of not finding a true impact on neonatal mortality. The investigators could not explain this result except that it had occurred as a result of the 20% chance of not measuring a true effect.
- Mortality reduction was greatest in preterm babies.

# Tackling health challenges for aging population

Shrinking fertility rates and longer lives are changing the demographic landscape of countries worldwide, challenging not only the way we think about how to fund care for older people, but attitudes to ageing itself.

A recent report submitted to the United Nations Human Rights Council stating that the 60-years-and-plus population is the fastest growing of all demographic segments. The report states that by 2050 one in five people will join their ranks and that the 60-years-and-plus group will number around one billion by the end of the decade.

While we tend to think of shrinking birth rates and ageing populations as mainly an issue for high-income countries, this demographic shift is now being felt most acutely in developing countries, particularly in Asia, where more than half of the world's over-60s (400 million) currently reside. The increasingly large number of older people — aged 60 years and plus — is thus dependent on a proportionately shrinking resource, that is on younger people and, in particular, younger relatives.

Given the importance of family for providing or helping with long-



PHOTO: REUTERS

term care for the elderly, and the fact that as a resource this is rapidly shrinking, what can governments do to avoid a catastrophic breakdown in elder care in the coming decades?

What is needed is a fundamental rethinking of our attitudes to older people, particularly the notion that older people constitute a social burden. Active ageing is not just about physical activity and health care, but includes continuing participation in social, economic, cultural and civic affairs.

To achieve these things countries will have to do a great deal more than merely encourage people to get on their bikes or go to the gym:

to become a reality active ageing requires a wholesale rethinking of the role of old people in society. Bit older people want to continue to participate. Sticking to these outdated ideas of ageing is limiting our ability to create the types of lives we may want to live in the 21st century.

But however active and healthy people can remain after 60, there comes a point where older people start to become frail and lose autonomy. Some kind of care system has to be in place and that system has to be funded. Where cognitive impairment is part of a person's declining health, the need for care and funding becomes acute.

It appears that certain aging disease like dementia is likely to be a huge problem in the future, particularly for low and middle-income countries which, by 2050 are forecast to be home to around 75 percent of people living with dementia.

So ageing presents some formidable challenges, particularly with regard to the way we end our lives, but for experts it would be a mistake to let the last years define the issue as a whole.

Source: World Health Organisation

## NUTRITION CORNER



Banana, a very good source of dietary zinc

## Enrich your diet with essential zinc

Zinc is an essential mineral required by the body for maintaining a sense of smell, keeping a healthy immune system, building proteins, triggering enzymes, and creating DNA. Zinc also helps the cells in your body communicate by functioning as a neurotransmitter.

A deficiency in zinc can lead to stunted growth, diarrhoea, impotence, hair loss, eye and skin lesions, impaired appetite, and depressed immunity. Conversely, consuming too much zinc can disrupt absorption of copper and iron, as well as create large amounts of toxic free radicals.

The current recommended daily allowance (RDA) for zinc is 15 mg. The foods that are rich in zinc and fulfill your requirement include bananas, dried, watermelon seeds, roasted pumpkin and squash seeds, low fat roast beef, blackberries, raspberries, dates, dark chocolate and cocoa powder, peanuts, dried apricots, oysters, dried peaches, toasted wheat germ, dried plums, veal liver, avocados, sesame seeds, dried grapes etc.

But getting too much zinc in your diet can actually weaken the strength of your immune system. Taking more than 45 mg of zinc per day can lead to a copper deficiency. 80 mg of zinc per day over the long term can lead to an increased risk of cardiovascular disease via a decrease in blood levels of HDL. Greater than 150 mg of zinc per day can weaken your immune system.

Nausea, an upset stomach, and vomiting are strong signs of zinc toxicity if you are taking a zinc supplement. For these reasons, many experts recommend that people should obtain zinc from a variety of whole, minimally processed foods.

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## Specialised hospital on spine and orthopaedics inaugurated



PHOTO: COURTESY

A new specialised hospital named 'Spine and Orthopaedics General Hospital' has been inaugurated recently in Panthapath, Dhaka. Guests and specialist physicians on spine and orthopaedics are seen in the photo at the inaugural ceremony of the hospital.

## Knowing for better living

## In Bangladesh ...

**1** in every **25** people suffers from any type of **Cancer**!

Exercise regularly

Take low-fat diet

Eat vegetables & fresh fruits

Avoid smoking & exposure to smoke

Maintain healthy weight

Ensure regular health check-up



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