

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

GLOBAL REPORT ON DROWNING

PREVENTING A LEADING KILLER



**World Health
Organization**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Drowning is a serious and neglected public health threat claiming the lives of 372 000 people a year worldwide.

More than 90% of these deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries.

This death toll is almost two thirds that of malnutrition and well over half that of malaria – but unlike these public health challenges, there are no broad prevention efforts that target drowning.

While this report addresses drowning across all countries and ages, the particularly high incidence of drowning in low- and middle-income countries and among children and young people makes these countries and groups a central focus.

OUR MESSAGE: PREVENTION IS VITAL

Once someone starts to drown, the outcome is often fatal. Unlike other injuries, survival is determined almost exclusively at the scene of the incident, and depends on two highly variable factors: how quickly the person is removed from the water, and how swiftly proper resuscitation is performed.

Prevention, therefore, is vital.



SECTION 1 DROWNING – A NEGLECTED PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUE

GLOBAL BURDEN

Alarmingly, drowning is among the 10 leading causes of death of children and young people in every region of the world, with children aged under 5 years disproportionately at risk and males twice as likely to drown as females. Over half of casualties are aged under 25 years. Income levels also have an impact – the overwhelming majority of drownings happen in low- and middle-income countries where people have close daily contact with water for work, transport and agriculture.

LIMITATIONS OF DATA

Data collection in many low- and middle-income countries is limited, hampering the planning, implementation and monitoring of drowning prevention measures. In addition, the way deaths are classified means the full extent of the world's drowning problem is underrepresented – statistics currently exclude intentional drowning (for example, suicide and homicide), as well as drowning deaths resulting from flood disasters and water transport incidents.¹ Data on non-fatal drownings, which could reveal something about the burden of serious injury and lifelong disability, are not routinely collected.

KEY RISK FACTORS

Lack of barriers controlling exposure to water bodies and lack of adequate, close supervision for infants and young children are a drowning risk, as are poor swim skills and low awareness of water dangers. In addition, high-risk behaviour, including consuming alcohol while engaging with water, is a risk among young people and adults. Other risk factors are transport on water and water crossings, lack of safe water supply, and flood disasters.

¹ Using the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) 10, WHO's global drowning mortality estimates are based *only* on deaths where drowning is classified as the external cause of death (i.e. where drowning was the event that caused the death – for example, a child drowning in a well), and not those where drowning was only the consequence of another classified external cause of death (e.g. transport incident, suicide, homicide, flood disaster, etc.).

SECTION 2 TEN ACTIONS TO PREVENT DROWNING

High-income countries have reduced their drowning burden and some of the strategies used have been successfully adapted in low- and middle-income settings. Based on available evidence, Section 2 sets out 10 actions that can help prevent drowning.

COMMUNITY-BASED ACTION

1. **Install barriers** controlling access to water.
2. **Provide safe places** (for example, a crèche²) away from water for pre-school children, with capable child care.
3. **Teach school-age children** basic swimming, water safety and safe rescue skills.
4. **Train bystanders** in safe rescue and resuscitation.
5. **Strengthen public awareness** of drowning and highlight the vulnerability of children.

EFFECTIVE POLICIES AND LEGISLATION

6. **Set and enforce safe boating**, shipping and ferry regulations.
7. **Build resilience and manage flood risks** and other hazards locally and nationally.
8. **Coordinate drowning prevention efforts** with those of other sectors and agendas.
9. **Develop a national water safety plan**.

FURTHER RESEARCH

10. **Address priority research** questions with well-designed studies.

² A crèche – also referred to as day care or a day care centre – is a place where young children are cared for during the day, usually while their parents are working.

SECTION 3 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Drowning is an important public health issue with major impacts on children and youth. Drowning is preventable. Proven strategies implemented at household, community and national level range from teaching basic swim skills and installing barriers that control exposure to water hazards, to providing safe spaces for children such as crèches and learning about safe rescue. Tailored to individual settings and risk groups, countries should take steps to improve data on drowning mortality and morbidity, and establish a national water safety plan.

Drowning is a multisectoral issue. Drowning prevention strategies have much in common with other public health agendas including safe water supply, rural development, disaster risk management and child health. More must be done to maximize these synergies – for example, village-based day care for pre-school children not only provides the early child development benefits associated with day care, it also prevents drowning and provides employment. Likewise, drowning risks could become a more clearly stated consideration of disaster risk management efforts in settings where flood disasters occur.

Given the multisectoral nature of drowning, a global partnership for drowning prevention should be established in order to serve as a policy and implementation leadership community for the issue of drowning prevention.

In summary, donors and governments must prioritize drowning prevention, and its integration with other public health agendas.