



ENHANCING WASH INFRASTRUCTURE IN SCHOOLS: BEST PRACTICES FOR IMPROVED MENSTRUAL HEALTH AND HYGIENE AMONG STUDENTS.

Community Medicine

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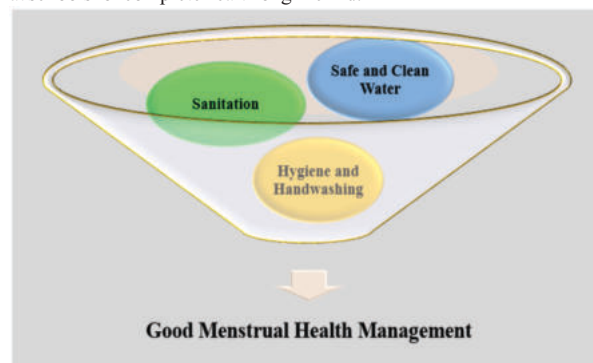
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KEYWORDS

INTRODUCTION:

In 2010, the United Nations acknowledged the right to safe water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) as a fundamental human right. The significance of WASH is underscored by Goal 6 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasizing the universal achievement of these essentials due to their critical role in public health. Despite this global recognition, the reality in 2019 revealed stark disparities, with 2.2 billion people lacking safe drinking water, 4.2 billion lacking safe sanitation, and 673 million practicing open defecation worldwide.(1) The Government of India has demonstrated a commitment to ensuring sanitation facilities for every child in the country. Initiatives like the Total Sanitation Campaign(TSC), introduced in 1999, aimed to extend sanitation coverage nationwide, with a particular focus on rural areas. Within the TSC framework, School Sanitation Hygiene Education (SSHE) has been prioritized, emphasizing the installation of toilets in every school. This dual focus aims to increase school attendance, particularly by addressing security concerns for girls, and to enhance overall health outcomes by mitigating the risk of diseases.(2) A parallel effort by the government, the Swachh Bharat Swachh Vidyalaya initiative, further reinforces the commitment to ensuring that all Indian schools possess fully functional and well-maintained water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities. These concerted actions align with the broader global goals of promoting WASH as a fundamental human right and addressing disparities in access to these essentials.(3) As we navigate the challenges of the 21st century, the transformative power of WASH cannot be overstated. By recognizing these elements as fundamental human rights, addressing disparities, and implementing comprehensive strategies, we can unlock a healthier, more sustainable future for all. Research has shown that insufficient school toilet facilities negatively impact academic achievement by contributing to elevated rates of adolescent dropout, particularly among girls. (4,5) This perspective article puts light on the necessity of WASH facilities at schools for complete health of girl child.



Benefits of WASH in the context of menstrual health:

1. Hygiene and cleanliness (SDG 6): Access to clean water and proper sanitation facilities ensures that individuals can maintain good personal hygiene during menstruation. This is essential for preventing infections and promoting overall health. Healthy girl-Healthy women-Healthy community.
2. Safe and private spaces: Adequate WASH facilities provide safe and private spaces for individuals to manage their menstrual

hygiene. This includes private toilets, washing facilities, and spaces for changing and disposing of menstrual hygiene products.

3. Dignity and privacy (SDG 10): Access to WASH facilities helps preserve the dignity of individuals during menstruation. Private and clean spaces allow for management of menstrual hygiene, reducing feelings of embarrassment or shame.
4. Preventing school absenteeism (SDG 4): Girls may miss school during their menstruation if there are no proper WASH facilities available. Access to clean and private toilets, as well as water for washing, encourages regular attendance and helps girls stay engaged in their education.
5. Addressing period poverty: Easy, adequate and free availability of menstrual materials like sanitary pads/menstrual cups in the toilets enables the girl to make use of them when in need, hence preventing embarrassment and also decreasing the chances of reproductive tract or genitourinary infections.
6. Promoting education and awareness: WASH facilities provide an opportunity for educational programs on menstrual health and hygiene. Having access to water and sanitation makes it easier to implement awareness campaigns, teaching individuals about proper menstrual hygiene practices and breaking stigmas surrounding menstruation.
7. Environmental sustainability (SDG 11): Adequate sanitation facilities, provision of reusable sanitary pads/menstrual cups contribute to proper disposal of menstrual hygiene products, reducing environmental pollution. This is particularly important for promoting sustainable waste management practices.
8. Community empowerment: Improved WASH facilities empower communities, especially women and girls, by providing the tools necessary for managing menstrual hygiene with dignity. This contributes to the overall well-being and empowerment of the community.
9. Healthier communities (SDG 11): Access to clean water and sanitation facilities positively impacts the health of communities. In imparting the menstrual health teachers and healthcare professionals play a pivotal role. By addressing menstrual health through WASH initiatives, communities can experience improved well-being and a reduction in preventable illnesses.

CONCLUSION:

In schools, essential water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities are vital for maintaining personal hygiene. Accessible, improved toilet facilities with menstrual hygiene products contribute significantly to enhancing girls' menstrual health. Unfortunately, girls often encounter challenges in managing menstruation due to an unsupportive physical environment, inadequate WASH facilities, and a lack of proper menstrual management materials at school. Recognized as fundamental individual requirements, basic WASH services are needed in both homes and schools. These facilities play a crucial role in promoting menstrual health by ensuring clean water, private spaces, and education, contributing not only to individual well-being but also to the overall health and empowerment of communities.

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