

10 facts on midwifery



Competent midwives decrease the risk of dying during childbirth.

About 800 women and more than 8000 newborns die every day due to largely preventable complications during pregnancy, childbirth and the immediate postnatal period. In addition, every year, nearly 3 million babies are stillborn. Many of these lives could be saved if every birth were attended by a midwife.



More than one third of all births take place without a midwife or other skilled health staff.

Millennium Development Goal 5 (MDG 5) aims to improve maternal health. More midwives need to be trained to achieve the MDG 5 target to increase the number of births attended by skilled health personnel to 95% by 2015.



Midwives also provide essential care after birth.

After childbirth, midwives support mothers to breastfeed and to prevent mother-to-child-transmission of HIV. They check the health of the newborn and also counsel the mother on newborn care, birth spacing and family planning.



Only one in three rural women in developing areas receive necessary care.

During pregnancy and childbirth, women in rural areas, remote districts and smaller health facilities in particular suffer from a lack of midwives and health personnel with midwifery skills serving their communities. Therefore, countries need to improve distribution and retention of midwives, especially in poor and remote areas.



Midwives need regular refresher training and support.

They need training to acquire and maintain competencies to provide high quality care to women and newborns. In addition to providing opportunities for midwives to update their skills, governments need to adopt policies that allow midwives to use their full knowledge and expertise in communities, health centres and hospitals.



Working in teams with the necessary supplies is essential for midwives.

Midwives need more than just training to be successful. In order for them to provide high quality care they also need adequate infrastructure, readily available drugs and supplies, water and sanitation, communication, and a functioning referral system if complications arise during childbirth.



Reliable data on the numbers of practicing midwives are scarce.

We do not know how many trained staff are actually working in the delivery room and how the workforce is distributed within regions and countries. This information is needed to develop targeted national plans and programmes.



Many trained midwives leave their home countries to work abroad.

Countries often have difficulties retaining trained personnel due to difficult working conditions, poor remuneration, support and supervision and a lack of career paths. Many trained midwives work abroad for better salaries and more favourable working conditions. This creates a dearth of skilled staff in countries that need them most.



WHO advises countries on how to support midwives.

WHO works with countries to ensure that midwifery issues are addressed in national health strategies and plans. WHO encourages countries to better recognize midwifery as a profession and support midwives as an essential pillar of the maternal and newborn healthcare workforce.



WHO is working with partners to increase the numbers of competent midwives.

According to recent estimates, countries require a minimum of six health workers with midwifery skills per 1 000 births to make sure that 95% of women are attended during childbirth and to accelerate the reduction of maternal and newborn mortality. WHO supports countries to address the shortage of health workers.