

The Cost of Poor Hygiene

"Without good hygiene, consumers are vulnerable to a wide range of infectious diseases that not only have the potential to severely undermine the quality of their lives, but even to end their lives prematurely," says Steve Miles, Global Vice President Health Brands.

"And the reality is that hygiene standards remain woefully low around the world, reflected in the high incidence of infectious intestinal diseases (IIDs), such as diarrhoea."

Although the IID problem is most severe in developing countries, where two million children die each year from diarrhoea, it is also a major issue in industrialised nations. In the UK, for example, it is estimated that one in five people succumb to IIDs annually, leading to around 35,000 hospital admissions and more than 30 deaths. Not to mention the physical and social discomfort that millions of others suffer with these types of disease.

New risks

"The risks are likely to intensify," says Sally Bloomfield, a member of the International Scientific Forum on Home Hygiene (IFH), which receives an educational grant from Unilever. "As populations age and the incidence of immuno-deficient diseases such as AIDS rises, more people will be vulnerable to the consequences of poor hygiene."

"Infectious diseases are also hopping around the world quicker than before due to globalisation, as we saw with SARS. In some cases, you can't treat these with antibiotics as they're viral; others are bacterial but resistant to antibiotics, such as the hospital superbug MRSA (Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus)."

New pathogens – agents that can cause disease – are also constantly appearing. Since the 1970s, at least one new pathogen has been recorded each year. Good hygiene is often the only way to avoid many pathogens and their consequences.

A simple solution

One of the main stumbling blocks, says Dr Val Curtis at the London School of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, is that most people do not use one of the world's most basic and widely available home hygiene products – the humble bar of soap.

"Hands are a superhighway for transmitting germs, but most people don't wash their hands with soap and water at key times," she explains. "In the UK, for example, only 30% of people wash their hands after going to the toilet and only 43% after changing a nappy." The statistics in developing countries are similar.