

Theme 7.2.2 What are the health and care issues in sub-Saharan Africa?

Health issues in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)

SSA remains the world's poorest region. Despite improvements in healthcare during the period of the Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015), it remains the region with the highest infant mortality rate (IMR).

Health is a major issue for SSA because:

- unhealthy workforces are not economically productive
- high death rates from diseases such as malaria and HIV/AIDS decrease the available workers in a country
- an unhealthy population requires significant investment in hospitals, clinics and trained healthcare professionals.

Health issues are usually worse in many SSA countries since they have large rural populations. This is significant since rural populations are usually:

- poorer and cannot afford treatment
- further away from medical care
- poorly educated about the symptoms of diseases.

This is not to say that urban areas do not get these diseases. In urban areas, health issues are more likely to be:

- sanitary diseases such as cholera, typhus and dysentery
- AIDS and HIV – spread through intercourse and more common in areas with higher population densities.

Malaria

Malaria is a disease many people face in tropical areas within SSA. Malawi is one country with a significant issue.

Being close to lakes and other bodies of water increases the risk of Malaria since this is the preferred breeding ground for mosquitoes.

Wet seasons in the tropics see the number of infections increase significantly.

In Malawi, 83% of people live in rural areas, which makes gaining access to a doctor much more difficult if they contract the disease.

The areas at the highest risk are located next to Lake Malawi and towards the flatlands in southern Malawi. Both locations are ideal breeding grounds for mosquitoes.

Strategies used to tackle malaria include:

- ITNs (insecticide treated nets)
- anti-malarial drugs
- filling in swamp areas (mosquito breeding grounds)
- insecticide sprays.

AIDS and HIV

SSA is the region worst affected by HIV, an incurable disease which attacks the immune system and leads to AIDS. HIV normally affects people aged 16–55 but can affect babies who may be born with the disease.

How does HIV spread?

- Contaminated blood
- Sexual intercourse
- Hereditary (a child may be born with the disease if a parent has HIV).

HIV and AIDS have significant impact on the population:

- death of family members leaving children orphaned or parents bereaved
- fewer workers
- high costs for ARVs (anti-retroviral drugs).

The disease itself is incurable but can be treated with ARVs. These drugs are often too expensive for many people to afford.

Strategies to tackle HIV:

- education about safe sex and life choices
- ARVs
- NGOs – charity support to educate and provide free contraception. This has led to a 67% decrease in HIV rates in Malawi.