



WATER for HEALTH

TAKING CHARGE



World Health Organization – Geneva

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The World Health Organization 2001

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FOREWORD



WORLD WATER DAY

Long before the advent of modern medical care, industrialized countries decreased their levels of water-related disease through good water management. Yet, even in these countries, outbreaks of water-borne disease continue to occur, sometimes with lethal consequences. In developing countries, preventable water-related disease blights the lives of the poor. Diseases resulting from bad hygiene rank among the leading causes of ill-health.

Much of this suffering is needless. Health provides an effective gateway for development and poverty alleviation. Improving water management is a powerful tool that can be used by individuals, communities and households to protect their own health.

3.4 million people, mostly children, die annually from water-related diseases. Most of these illnesses and deaths can be prevented through simple, inexpensive measures. For instance, trachoma remains the leading cause of preventable blindness, accounting for 146 million acute cases around the world. But the disease is almost unheard of in places where basic water supply, sanitation and hygiene prevail.

Safe water supply and adequate sanitation to protect health are among the basic human rights. Ensuring their availability would contribute immeasurably to health and productivity for development. "Business as usual" is no longer an option. We don't have enough time to just wait for large infrastructure investments to provide these basic services to all who need them. Several simple interventions are available, such as improving the quality of water in the home as well as improving hygiene education at the household level. Poor people can take charge of their own destinies and improve their lives by applying some of these measures. But they need to know what works and how such interventions can be exploited.

World Water Day, celebrated on 22nd March, became an annual event after the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and brought home to millions of people the importance of cherishing a valuable resource which affects our very existence. The theme for 2001, Water and Health, highlights the opportunities for promoting health and development through safe water. People everywhere can use this day to raise awareness of the high level of disease and misery that results from bad and inadequate water sources. People can learn that they need not be victims, but can take matters into their own hands to create good, clean water for better health.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Gro H. Brundtland". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Gro Harlem Brundtland
Director-General



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Water is one of the earth's most precious and threatened resources.

Health is one of each person's most precious resources.

We need to enhance and protect them both.

Water for Health

WATER AND HEALTH:

Two precious resources linked to one another

From outer space, the earth looks like a "blue" planet because most of its surface is covered by water. But only 2.5% of that water is fresh, and most of that lies frozen and inaccessible in the icecaps and Greenland, leaving less than 1% of fresh water accessible in lakes, river channels and underground.

Hydrologists estimate that the average annual flow of all the world's fresh water ranges from 35 000 Km³ to 50 000 Km³. Due to a mix of geographical, environmental and financial factors, as well as to increased pollution from municipal and industrial waste, the leaching of fertilizers and pesticides used in agriculture, only about one-third of the world's potential fresh water can be used for human needs. As pollution increases, the amount of usable water decreases.

Water contributes much to health. Good health is the essence of development. However water's protective role is largely unseen and taken for granted in the wealthier countries. More attention is paid to its role in disease transmission than health protection. Water contributes to health directly within households through food and nutrition, and indirectly as a means of maintaining a healthy, diverse environment. These two precious resources — water and health — together could enhance prospects for development.

