

ANAL CLEANSING: Lack of materials contributes to disease, shame, confusion

Questions

Without proper materials for anal cleansing, students and their classmates are at increased risk of acquiring diarrheal diseases through hand contamination. The lack of such materials at schools is a concern. Furthermore, latrines can be quickly filled if inadequate materials (such as rocks or corncobs) are used by students. To better understand how anal cleansing can be effectively communicated, SWASH+ researchers wanted to know three things:

- How do students feel about anal cleansing?
- What materials are best for anal cleansing? and,
- How much do students know about this area?

Research

Since 2007, the SWASH+ program has been conducting research in rural Nyanza Province, Kenya, to assess the impact, sustainability, and scalability of a school-based water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) intervention. Anal cleansing materials, which are used to wipe one's buttocks after defecation, were not provided to schools. This research stems from six focus group discussions with boys and girls ages 12 to 15 in three rural schools in Nyando District.



Toilet paper is the preferred material for anal cleansing. When unavailable, school children resort to using leaves, stones or schoolbook paper

Findings

A number of clear themes appeared from the SWASH+ focus group discussions:

There are **generational changes** in anal cleansing practices, where the elderly, adults, and small children have no shame about using leaves to wipe, while this practice is embarrassing for adolescents.

Social responsibility plays a significant role in students'

desires to wipe and to wash their hands after wiping. "Sometimes there is feces left on you and your hands and, say, you have bought doughnuts and shared them with someone and then he will eat your dirt... and then he is sick and then you feel bad," said a grade 7 male from Kamunda.

Perceived personal risk of disease or illness was mentioned near the end of discussions as a reason to clean properly. Cholera was the illness mentioned first, followed by dysentery, typhoid and *nyach* (a term for any STI excluding HIV/AIDS).

Emotional factors that motivate students to wipe include a desire to avoid shame due to soiled clothing or smelliness. Students also mentioned that ineffective cleansing inhibits concentration. "When you smell, you cannot focus in class," said a grade 7 female from Bunde.

Students reported using several materials for anal cleansing: **schoolbook paper** and **leaves** were cited as the most frequently used while in school, and students in all focus groups reported feeling guilty about tearing up school books to wipe their bottoms. Using **leaves** is considered less appropriate for older children and damaging to the environment. **Toilet paper** is considered the best method because it is soft and does not leave a lingering smell of feces.

There is significant confusion on **how to wipe and which method is best** for anal cleansing. Students in focus groups often reported that they have never discussed this topic with friends or family, with only a minority reporting conversations with teachers, health officers, and parents.

Recommendations

Anal cleansing is a taboo subject and is often avoided or overlooked by researchers and program staff. SWASH+ recommendations include teaching children which materials are safe to use, encouraging school officials to ensure adequate materials are available, and working to educate parents about the importance of anal cleansing.

Based on the **SWASH+ Research on Anal Cleansing: Final Report** by the Center for Global Safe Water at Emory University (2009), available at <http://www.swashplus.org>.

SWASH+ is a five-year applied research project to identify, develop, and test innovative approaches to school-based water, sanitation and hygiene in Nyanza Province, Kenya. The partners that form the SWASH+ consortium are CARE, Emory University, the Great Lakes University of Kisumu, the Government of Kenya, the Kenya Water for Health Organisation (KWAHO), and Water.org (formerly Water Partners). Visit us online at www.swashplus.org.