



ISSUE BRIEF

Healthier Mothers and Children Through Birth Spacing

Helping women achieve healthy pregnancies and safe births is one of the highest priorities of USAID's family planning program. One of the best ways is through birth spacing, which not only results in healthier pregnancy but also reduces under-5 mortality.



Optimal birth spacing is the interval between births that provides the greatest health, social, and economic benefits for a family. Enabling couples to determine when they will have children is vital to safe motherhood and healthy children.

In 2001, USAID sponsored a new and more rigorous analysis on birth spacing and mortality and morbidity. The analysis, based on Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data from 17 developing countries, found that children born three to five years after a previous birth are more likely to survive at all stages of infancy and childhood through age 5 than children born before three years. The best evidence indicates that "three to five saves lives."

Benefits to children's health. Longer spacing benefits children's health. Research shows that a child born three to five years after the birth of its sibling is:

- About 2.5 times more likely to survive than children born at shorter intervals
- Less likely to be malnourished during infancy and through age 5 and suffer less from stunting (short height for age) and underweight(1)

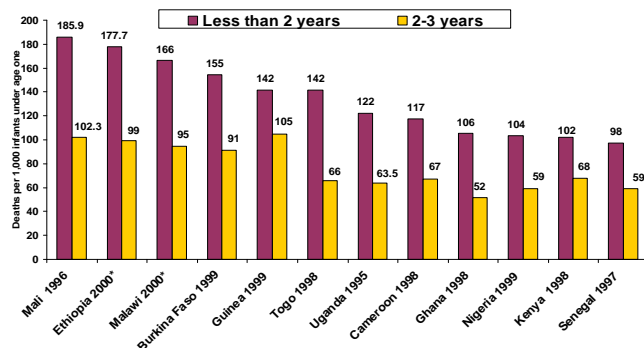
For example, a study in Nigeria showed that if all couples spaced births three to five years apart, deaths of children under the age of 5 could fall by an estimated 23 percent.(1)

Longer birth intervals also are better for mothers' health. Very short birth intervals (less than 15 months) are associated with maternal death rates 150 percent higher than at longer intervals, as well as with various complications of pregnancy.(2)

Throughout the developing world, women are giving birth at shorter intervals than they would like.(3) As a result, many women not only are falling short of the recommended three- to five-year birth intervals but also are not meeting their own preferred birth spacing.

Infant Mortality by Birth Interval

On average, infants born after intervals of less than two years are twice as likely to die as those born after longer intervals



* Figures here are only for a two-year birth interval instead of a two- to three-year interval. Source: Country DHS Reports.

Women prefer longer birth intervals. Using DHS data from five sub-Saharan African countries, researchers found that in general, women who know about, approve of, discuss, and use family planning prefer longer birth intervals than do their counterparts. Women in Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, and Comoros prefer birth intervals of up to four years. In these countries, the length of birth intervals would increase by 33 percent or more if women's preferences were realized.(4)

Birth spacing improves families' quality of life. Longer intervals allow parents to devote more time to each child in the early years, easing pressures on the family's finances and giving parents more time for activities other than child rearing. In Nepal, 40 focus groups showed strong support for spacing among mothers, fathers, grandmothers, and community leaders. Villagers mentioned health and family economic problems resulting from too-frequent births. "Babies are forced from the breast too early," said one. "Mothers and newborns are weak and parents cannot send their children to school when there are too many or they come too soon."(5)

How USAID's Family Planning Programs Help

Women who want to space their births need access not only to family planning information and counseling but also to contraceptive supplies that offer them a wide variety of methods from which to choose. Through counseling, family planning and reproductive health providers can play an important role in the communication, service provision, and outreach efforts necessary to help families understand the importance of three- to five-year intervals and help women achieve their desired birth intervals. These efforts will help women realize their personal goals for improving their health and well-being as well as that of their children.

USAID works with communities, professionals, and political leaders to help women and men understand the importance of optimal birth spacing and the role family planning can play. In Egypt, USAID worked with leaders from conservative Christian communities and gained their support for optimal birth spacing. In Pakistan and Egypt, USAID worked with traditional sheiks and Islamic leaders, sharing with them passages from the Koran that supported optimal birth spacing messages.

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(1) Center for Communication Programs. (2002). Birth Spacing: Three to Five Saves Lives *Population Reports*, XXX (3). (2) Conde-Agudelo, A., & Belizan, J. M. (2000). Maternal morbidity and mortality associated with interpregnancy interval: Cross sectoral study. *British Medical Journal*, 321 (7271), 1255-1259. (3) Rafalimanana, H., & Westoff, C. F. (2000). Potential effects on fertility and child health and survival of birth-spacing preferences in sub-Saharan Africa. *Studies in Family Planning*, 31(2), 99-110. (4) Bankole, A., & Westoff, C. F. (1995). *Childbearing attitudes and intentions*. Demographic and Health Surveys Comparative Studies No. 17. Calverton, MD: Macro International. (5) Shrestha, C., & Manandhar, B. (2003). How to Say "Birth Spacing" in Kathmandu: A Public/Private Partnership to Promote Contraception for Family Health in Nepal. Nepal: World Education, Inc. (reproduced from the PATH Web site at <http://path.org>).