Imagine a life without a clean, private place to defecate and urinate: the embarrassment of going to the toilet in an abandoned plot or on the open street and, for girls, the fear of assault at night.

This is the reality of life for a staggering 2.6 billion people, most of whom live in extreme poverty in Africa and Asia. Inadequate sanitation in the home and in public places erodes human dignity, undermines development, and causes disease.

Putting fingers into their mouth puts young children most at risk of catching diarrhoea. For families, preventing faecal-oral contamination depends on proper hygiene, and disposing of children’s faeces safely. The availability of sufficient water enables both children and adults to wash their hands before meals and after defecating. Simple handwashing could save up to one million lives every year.

Realizing the Millennium Development Goal of halving the proportion of people without access to sanitation by 2015 would still leave almost a quarter of humanity without a basic latrine. Hopes of achieving even this modest goal are fading fast.

**Health effects**

Diseases caused by inadequate hygiene and sanitation, and unsafe drinking water:

- Intestinal worms (including ascariasis, trichuriasis and hookworm)
- Schistosomiasis
- Trachoma
- Diarrhoea
- Cholera
- Dysentery
- Typhoid
- Guinea Worm

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**Meagre sanitation**

Percentage of households without access to improved sanitation

- over 75%
- 51% – 75%
- 6% – 25%
- 5% and under
- 26% – 50%
- no data

*Every minute 1.1 million litres of raw sewage are dumped into the Ganges river. The same story is repeated in rivers, lakes and oceans around the world.*

*Adapted from Inheriting the World: The Atlas of Children’s Health and the Environment © WHO 2004*