



The SAFE Strategy to Fight Blinding Trachoma

For trachoma, an infectious eye disease that has blinded or irreversibly impaired the sight of 8 million people today—and may endanger the sight of 63 million more in the years ahead—global health experts have developed one of the most effective and adaptable treatment and prevention strategies ever created: **SAFE**.

SAFE is an innovative, community-based, World Health Organization (WHO)-endorsed approach to treating trachoma and reducing its underlying causes by combining medical treatment with behavioral and environmental improvements.

The SAFE strategy is the cornerstone of the International Trachoma Initiative's (ITI) trachoma elimination program. ITI serves as a catalyst for promoting SAFE to government ministries, international agencies, and policy makers at the regional and district levels. SAFE consists of:

SURGERY corrects trichiasis, which occurs when repeated trachoma infections cause the eyelashes of the upper eyelid to turn inward, scratching the cornea, and eventually leading to blindness. The surgery rotates eyelashes away from the eye, preventing further scarring and provides immediate relief from the pain of trichiasis. The procedure is cost effective and simple. It can be performed by a trained nurse in less than 15 minutes and can cost as little as \$15.

ANTIBIOTICS cure trachoma infection in individuals and suppress transmission in communities through a single-dose oral antibiotic, Zithromax®, donated by Pfizer Inc. By the end of 2007, 77 million treatments of Zithromax were administered through mass drug campaigns in ITI-supported countries.

FACE WASHING breaks the cycle of reinfection and prevents transmission of trachoma, especially among children, who are at highest risk of infection. The important role of hygiene is a key educational message, taught in schools and villages across trachoma endemic regions. It is a simple and effective behavior message and, according to the WHO, provides the most benefits of all the SAFE components.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPROVEMENT creates the setting for trachoma control sustainability. Trachoma is a disease of poverty and poor living conditions. ITI advocates for improved access to clear water and sanitation through building latrines and digging wells and keeping living areas clean. While these environmental improvements are larger scale infrastructure improvements, some are very simple solutions like families creating water tanks and jugs to improve their supply of safe, clean water.

All these interventions are relatively simple from a public health standpoint, but the successful implementation of **SAFE** requires extensive work with communities, as the behavioral changes that reduce trachoma can be challenging to achieve and maintain. The involvement of women is key, as women are at increased risk for the disease and are generally the caretakers for children (and the elderly), who are also particularly susceptible to trachoma.

Building on trachoma elimination success in Morocco, ITI is currently working on the ground in 15 countries focusing on the most vulnerable communities. In collaboration with governments and non-governmental allies at the national, regional, and district levels, ITI helps design, plan and support trachoma prevention and control activities using the **SAFE** strategy to prevent, treat, and ultimately eliminate trachoma.