

Women's Health

Mercy Ships Program Fact Sheet

About Obstetric Fistula



Jatu, Sierra Leone



Kumba, Sierra Leone



Yamah, Liberia

*Lives transformed
through hope
and healing...*

What is Obstetric Fistula?

Obstetric fistula is a preventable and mostly treatable condition that primarily affects young women from poor backgrounds. Fistula is one of the most devastating of all pregnancy-related disabilities. Usually the result of obstructed labor coupled with a lack of skilled medical care, obstetric fistula most often leads to permanent incontinence – a continuous leakage of urine and loss of control over bowel movements.

How does it happen?

A vaginal fistula, which usually affects pregnant women, results from prolonged labor, usually lasting two to five days, with delivery occurring only after the baby dies. During labor, the baby's head and the woman's pubic bone form a vice, cutting off blood flow to the tissue trapped in this area. Following delivery, the dead tissue sloughs away, leaving an abnormal opening between the birth canal and the bladder (less frequently, the rectum). Unable to control the flow of urine (and/or feces), the woman is perpetually wet and soiled. Affected women are often abandoned by their husbands and ostracized by their families and communities.

Fistula Statistics

- The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimates that every year between 50,000 and 100,000 women sustain an obstetric fistula during childbirth.
- The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that more than two million women are currently living with obstetric fistulas, a large number of which are in Africa.
- Obstetric fistula is both preventable and treatable, a condition that no woman should have to endure. Poverty is the number one indirect cause of obstetric fistula around the world. Obstructed labor and obstetric fistula account for 8% of maternal deaths worldwide. (Source: EngenderHealth)

Transformational Healthcare through Fistula Programs

Bringing Hope and Healing

Mercy Ships aims to reduce the effects of fistula in women in Africa by providing specialized medical treatment and training. Mercy Ships uses its hospital ships and also partners with land-based programs to deliver transformational healthcare to the forgotten poor.



Patient Screening



Onboard Operations



Fistula Operation



Dress Celebration

Fistula Repair Operations

Onboard our ship, the *Africa Mercy*, Mercy Ships performs free fistula repair operations for affected women. The healed patients are given new dresses and headdresses as symbols of their restored life.

Training & Prevention

To help build the capacity of healthcare systems in developing nations to address the condition of fistula, Mercy Ships networks with and provides training for local & international healthcare professionals, including surgeons, nurses and traditional birth attendants.

Dress Ceremonies

Restoring dignity goes beyond surgery. Women afflicted by obstetric fistula are often outcasts from their own homes – their relationships lost, their clothes soiled. We send them back with a celebration and a new dress, symbolizing their newfound wholeness and a brighter outlook to the future.

Aberdeen Women's Center

In 2005 Mercy Ships opened the Aberdeen Women's Center in Freetown, Sierra Leone, which has since become a self-sustaining project apart from the organization. The Aberdeen Women's Center provides the only comprehensive fistula repair service in Sierra Leone and has the capacity to treat up to 600 fistula patients per year. Today this site also provides labor and delivery services, plus midwife training. In Madagascar, Mercy Ships is helping establish a similar clinic in partnership with the Freedom from Fistula Foundation.

Through all of the surgical programs, Mercy Ships has performed more than 82,000 life-changing operations, including obstetric fistula repair.