

Maternal health (p. 22-23)

Maternal and child health are among the biggest challenges facing East Timor today. Almost half of the country's children are underweight or malnourished. This is one of the highest national rates in the world.

In East Timor, World Vision works with other organisations (including the Timorese government) to improve care for mothers – both before the birth (antenatal) and after the birth (postnatal) of their babies. This means helping communities to support women in remote areas achieve safe delivery. This includes home visits and the monitoring of children and mothers to help women use health facilities.



This arm band is used to measure a child's nutritional status.



Mothers come to the clinic for check-ups for themselves and their babies.

At 8am, Alexandrina and Joanna start their work as midwives at a clinic in East Timor's rural Baucau district. Both women are Timorese born. They received their qualifications overseas but returned to East Timor to work at World Vision's Early Childhood Clinic.

"I have a real desire to help people in this community, and I feel that is what I'm doing," said Alexandrina.

Before the clinic opened, mothers would have to catch a public bus into Baucau town to the local hospital. The distance and cost meant many children went without immunisations or treatment, and common childhood illnesses could be life-threatening.

Joanna spends most of her time doing home visits, especially to new and expecting mothers. When she meets a parent struggling with nutrition her advice is simple: "What you should do is buy a few vegetables – some potato and carrot, and maybe a tiny bit of sugar just to make her want to eat it." It is simple enough advice, and it is getting through because Joanna is bringing information about the importance of nutrition and immunisations directly into people's homes.

East Timor's high malnutrition rates have a number of causes. Often there's simply a lack of food. But the midwives concentrate on building up knowledge about food and nutrition, while making healthcare more accessible.

At the clinic, Alexandrina can see mothers are getting better at recognising when there is a problem. Today she treats many minor ailments that would previously have gone unnoticed, but now mothers bring in children at the first signs of illness - a cough, a skin rash or a bout of diarrhoea. The village has come to trust the clinic.

Pregnant and breastfeeding mothers receive iron folate supplements, tetanus immunisations and de-worming. All pregnant and breastfeeding mothers in the population are then monitored on a monthly basis and records kept with the Ministry of Health.



Jacinta has brought her son to the clinic for a check-up with midwife Joanna.

Pregnant and breastfeeding mothers can also receive food such as corn/soy blend and Vitamin A oil. In addition, home visits educate and promote behaviour change within families about how they use their food. For example, if there is a very good crop of vegetables, fathers are encouraged to use their extra vegetables to first ensure there is adequate food for the nourishment of their families, before taking the additional yield to the markets.

The midwives have worked hard to change aspects of East Timorese daily life that could be harmful to child health. Throwing away colostrum (the first few days' milk; a natural vitamin/protein boost for newborns) and closing the mother and baby inside a smoky room are two harmful practices that Alexandrina and Joanna hope will one day become a thing of the past. World Vision set up the clinic in 2008 as part of its Early Childhood Health Promotion initiative in the district. It is staffed entirely by women.

Alexandrina and Joanna visit new parents within days of a child's birth, often with volunteers. As they do their rounds, the midwives share their knowledge. It is the only healthcare facility for hundreds of people who live within walking distance. Prior to the clinic, immunisations were difficult and home births were the norm, but the clinics and their staff have begun to reverse that trend.

For you to do!

1. What are some behaviours that have been unhelpful or damaging to the health of mothers and their children?
2. What are the helpful interventions that are improving maternal health in East Timor?