

Report of a WHO Technical Consultation on Birth Spacing

Geneva, Switzerland
13–15 June 2005



World Health
Organization

Department of Making Pregnancy Safer
Department of Reproductive Health and Research

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This document reflects the available evidence up until 2005. New research has emerged and may be applicable to the inter-pregnancy interval after miscarriage or induced abortion.

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This report of a World Health Organization (WHO) “Technical Consultation and Scientific Review of Birth Spacing”, held in Geneva, Switzerland, from 13 to 15 June 2005, was written by Cicely Marston. The report also draws on findings from systematic reviews and research presented by Agustín Conde-Agudelo, Julie DaVanzo, Kathryn Dewey, Shea Rutstein, and Bao-Ping Zhu. We thank the meeting participants for the time they spent reviewing documents and participating in discussions, the 30 reviewers from international organizations and from 13 countries who provided comments on the background documents for the meeting, and to Barbara Hulka for chairing the meeting. We gratefully acknowledge the United States Agency for International Development for all of their support and efforts, particularly Maureen Norton and Jim Shelton, as well as Taroub Harb Faramand and other CATALYST staff. The technical review, meeting and report were co-ordinated by Annie Portela, Iqbal Shah, Jelka Zupan and Claire Tierney of WHO. Paul Van Look and Monir Islam provided critical advice, suggestions and support.

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recommendations for birth spacing made by international organizations are based on information that was available several years ago. While publications by the World Health Organization (WHO) and other international organizations recommend waiting at least 2–3 years between pregnancies to reduce infant and child mortality, and also to benefit maternal health, recent studies supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have suggested that longer birth spacing, 3–5 years, might be more advantageous. Country and regional programmes have requested that WHO clarify the significance of the USAID-supported studies.

With support from USAID, WHO undertook a review of the evidence. From 13 to 15 June 2005, 37 international experts, including the authors of the background papers and WHO and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) staff, participated in a WHO technical consultation held at WHO Headquarters in Geneva. The objective of the meeting was to review evidence on the relationship between different birth-spacing intervals and maternal, infant and

analytical techniques. All the papers submitted were drafts, subject to revision based on the discussions. One study used longitudinal data from Matlab, Bangladesh (DaVanzo et al., draft, no date); one contained an analysis of cross-sectional Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) data from 17 countries (Rutstein, draft, no date). Three of the main background papers were reviews: two provided data from systematic reviews and meta-analysis (Conde-Agudelo, draft 2004; Rutstein et al., draft 2004), and one reviewed literature pertaining specifically to maternal and child nutrition (Dewey and Cohen, draft 2004). The supplementary paper reviewed three studies that used birth records from Michigan and Utah, USA (Zhu, draft 2004). One other background paper specifically looked at post-abortion (miscarriage and induced abortion) inter-pregnancy intervals in Latin America, using hospital records (Conde-Agudelo et al., draft 2004). A list of the papers discussed, the meeting agenda, and the list of participants is given in Annexes 1–3. Together, the set of papers provided an extensive collection of information on the relationship between birth-spacing intervals and maternal, infant and child health

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