

Trachoma

Information Sheet 2007

Trachoma is a chronic conjunctivitis caused by repeated episodes of infection with the bacteria *Chlamydia trachomatis* that can lead to conjunctival scarring.

Trichiasis is a sight-threatening complication of trachoma where the lid margin and eyelashes turn inwards. The rubbing of the eyelashes on the cornea leads to corneal damage and blindness in later life. Secondary infections may also contribute to vision loss. However, active trachoma does not inevitably lead to cicatricial disease and blindness.

Prevalence

In Australia, trachoma and trichiasis affect mainly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in some remote areas. The exact prevalence of trachoma and trichiasis is not known.

Risk factors

Trachoma is strongly associated with sub-optimal housing and living environments. Routes of transmission include: conveyance by fingers, indirect spread on fomites, coughing and sneezing and by eye-seeking flies.

Interventions

Trachoma control in endemic regions requires a holistic, coordinated and sustained public health response with the involvement of public health units, primary health care services and housing and essential services in affected geographical regions to reduce the risk.

The WHO recommends the adoption of the SAFE strategy (Surgery, Antibiotics, Facial Cleanliness and Environmental improvement) for trachoma control. There are a range of surgical procedures currently in use to correct trichiasis. Antibiotic treatment may reduce the transmission of infection. Face washing is likely to be effective in controlling trachoma, when promoted as part of a holistic program of personal hygiene.

Environmental factors associated with trachoma include household flies breeding unchecked in public latrines, uncollected household refuse and on neglected domestic animals; overcrowded housing; contaminated water supplied to households; community education around the importance of personal and community hygiene not reinforced or maintained.

There is no national approach to trachoma control. In some states and in the Northern Territory where trachoma is still prevalent a variety of trachoma control activities are implemented.

The Department of Health and Ageing is currently working with the Communicable Diseases Network Australia (CDNA) to develop guidelines for a nationally consistent approach to the surveillance and public health management of trachoma within Australia. The CDNA is the peak national body for the public health management of communicable diseases. The CDNA reports to the Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council through the National Public Health Partnership. The CDNA intends to consult with key national stakeholders before finalising the guidelines.

Reference

World Health Organization. 2004. *Fact Sheet: Blindness: Vision 2020 – The Global Initiative for the Elimination of Avoidable Blindness*