Reckitt Global Hygiene Institute

Looking at hygiene along the life-course

Hygiene refers to the practices that help maintain health and prevent the spread of diseases. It is often the forgotten partner of WASH.

Written by The Economist INTELLIGENCE UNIT

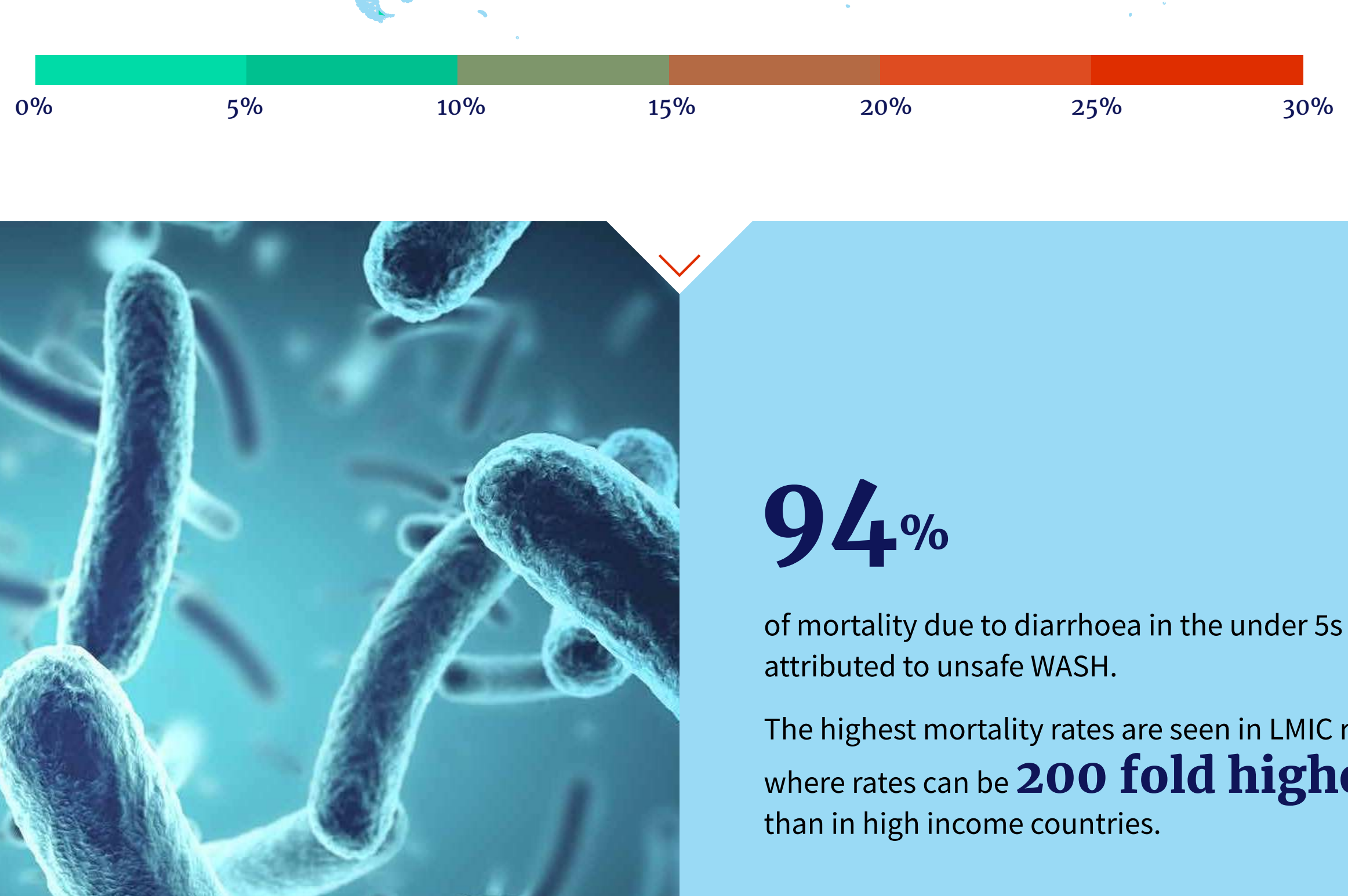
By taking a life-course approach to hygiene, policymakers can maximise the impact of interventions on a person's life during critical points. Aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, this can support the integration of individual, social, economic and environmental considerations.

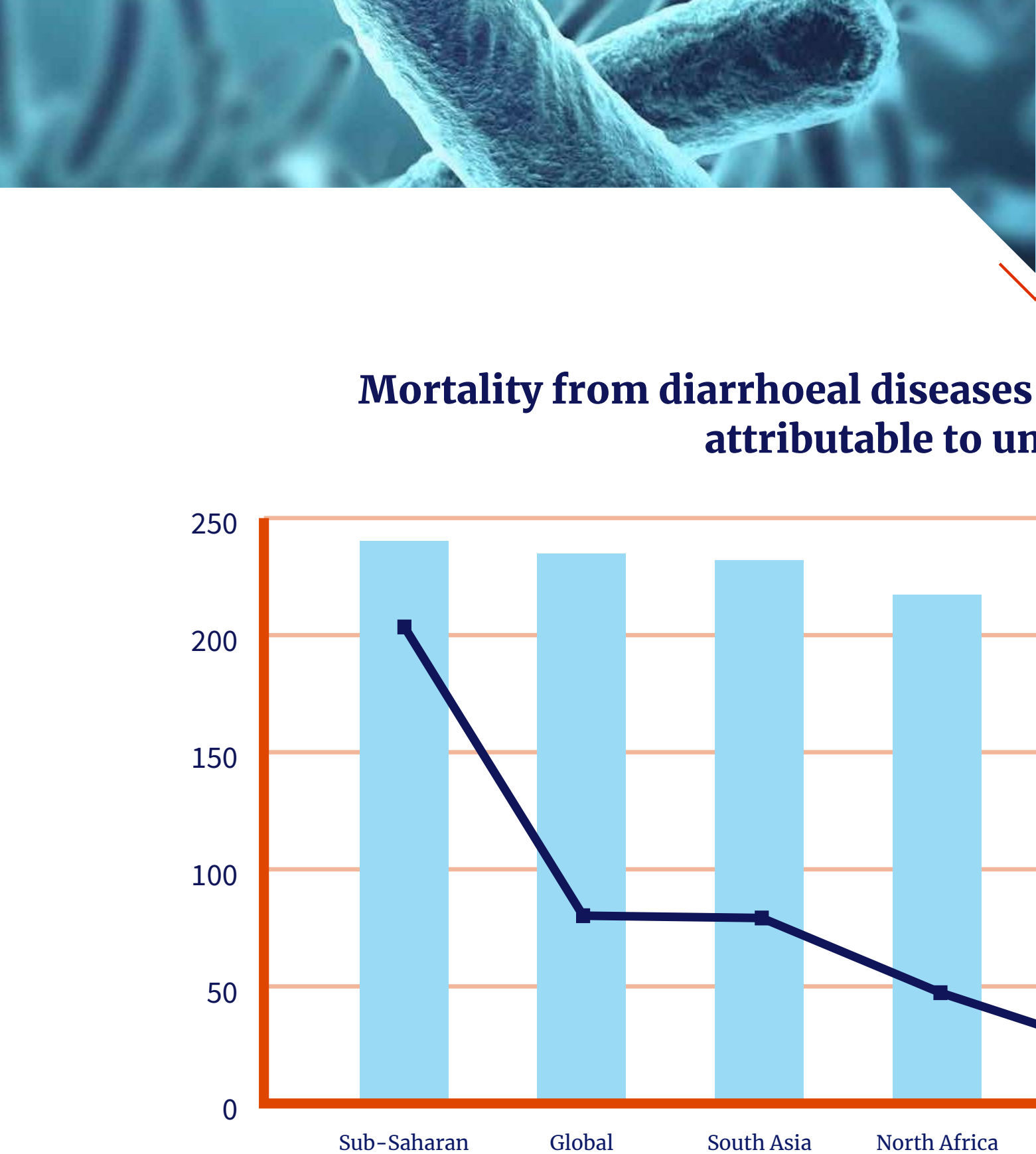
- Childhood
- Adolescence
- Adulthood
- Older person

Childhood

Diarrhoeal diseases are a major killer of young children, killing around half a million under 5s each year.

Percentage of deaths caused by diarrhoea in children under 5 years of age, 2017



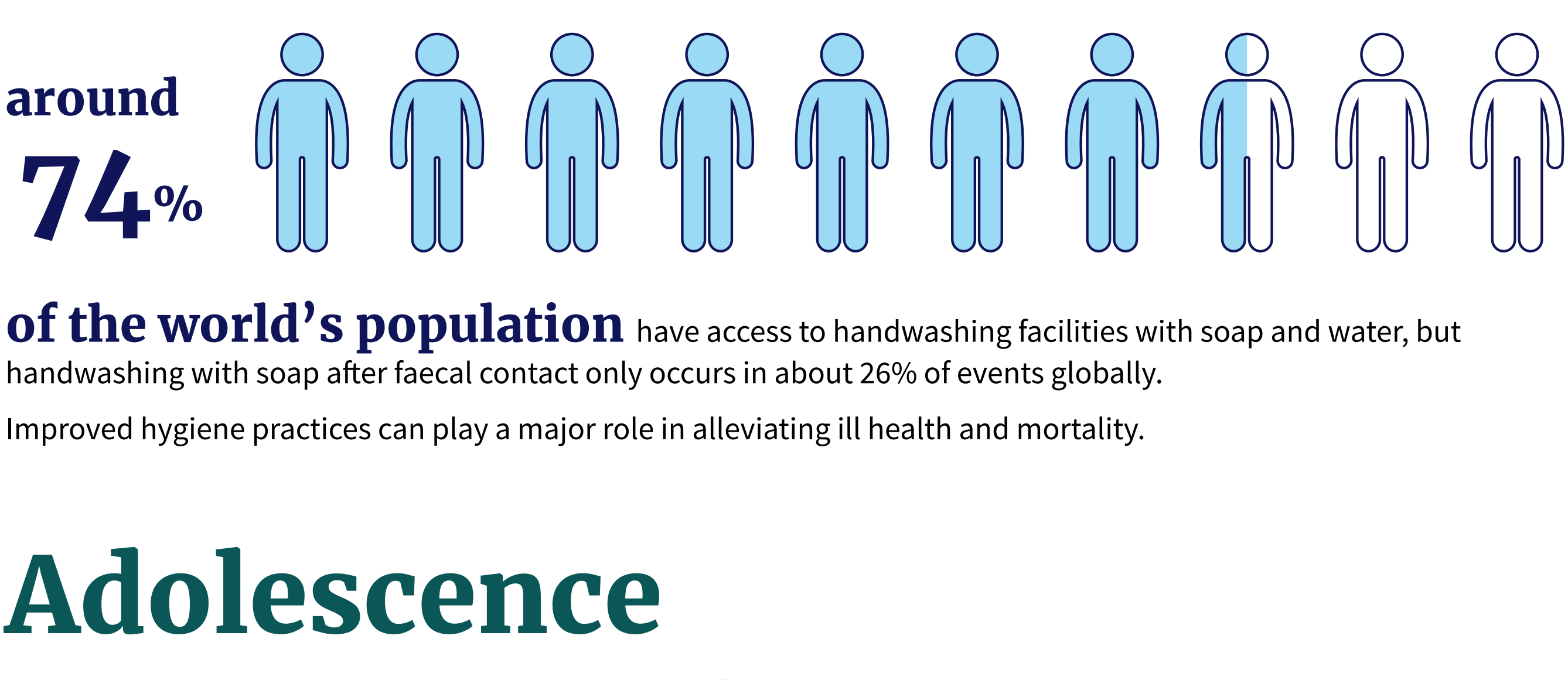


94%

of mortality due to diarrhoea in the under 5s can be attributed to unsafe WASH.

The highest mortality rates are seen in LMIC regions where rates can be **200 fold higher** than in high income countries.

Mortality from diarrhoeal diseases in under 5s by region, and fraction attributable to unsafe WASH, 2017



around 74%

of the world's population have access to handwashing facilities with soap and water, but handwashing with soap after faecal contact only occurs in about 26% of events globally.

Improved hygiene practices can play a major role in alleviating ill health and mortality.

Adolescence

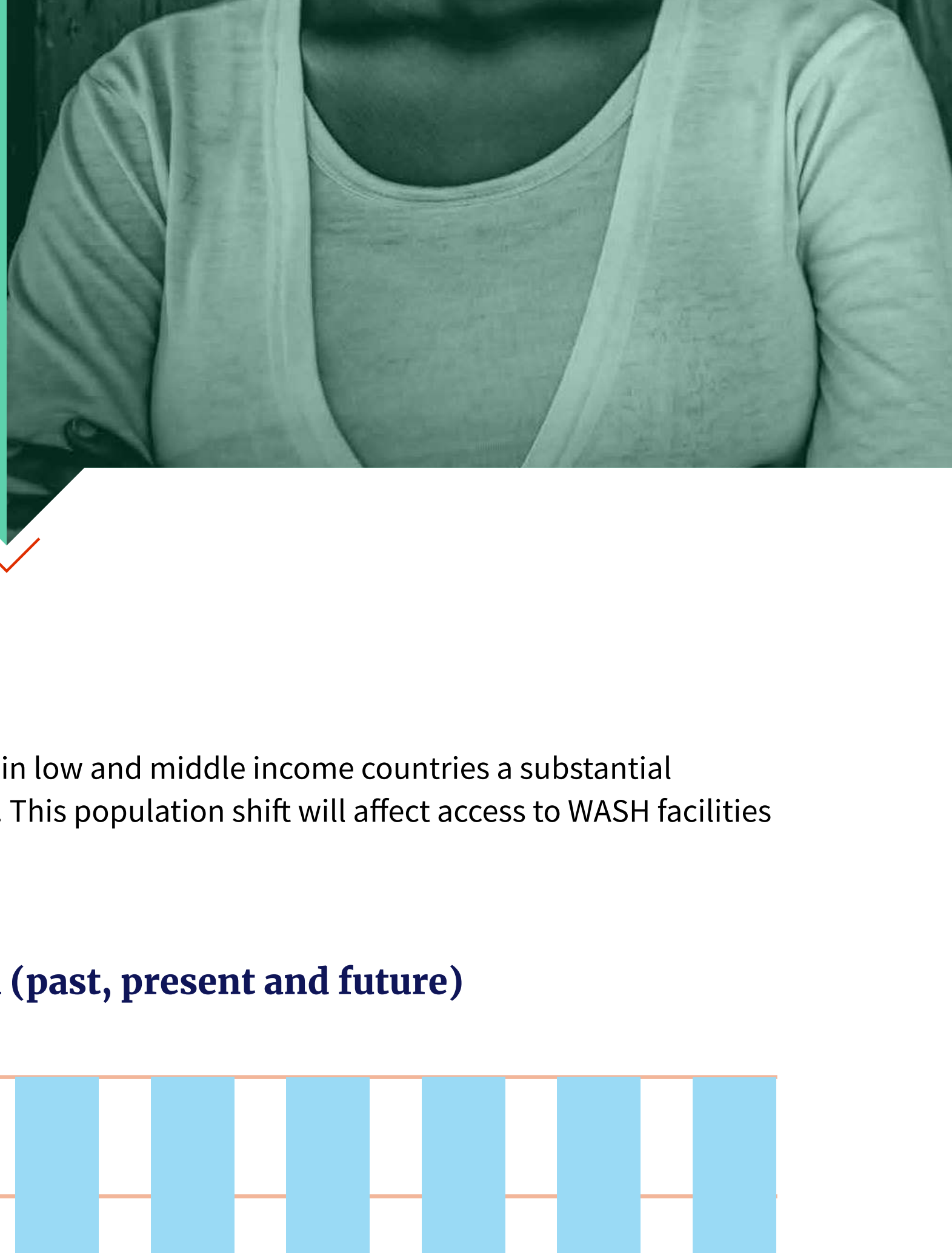
Adolescence is a time to build self-esteem, confidence and long term social and economic prospects. Globally, around half of the female population or **1.9bn are of menstruating age.**

They spend around **65 days every year** managing menstruation.

But many obstacles hinder menstrual hygiene management, which can affect education, work, and ability to participate in wider society.

Girls and women need:

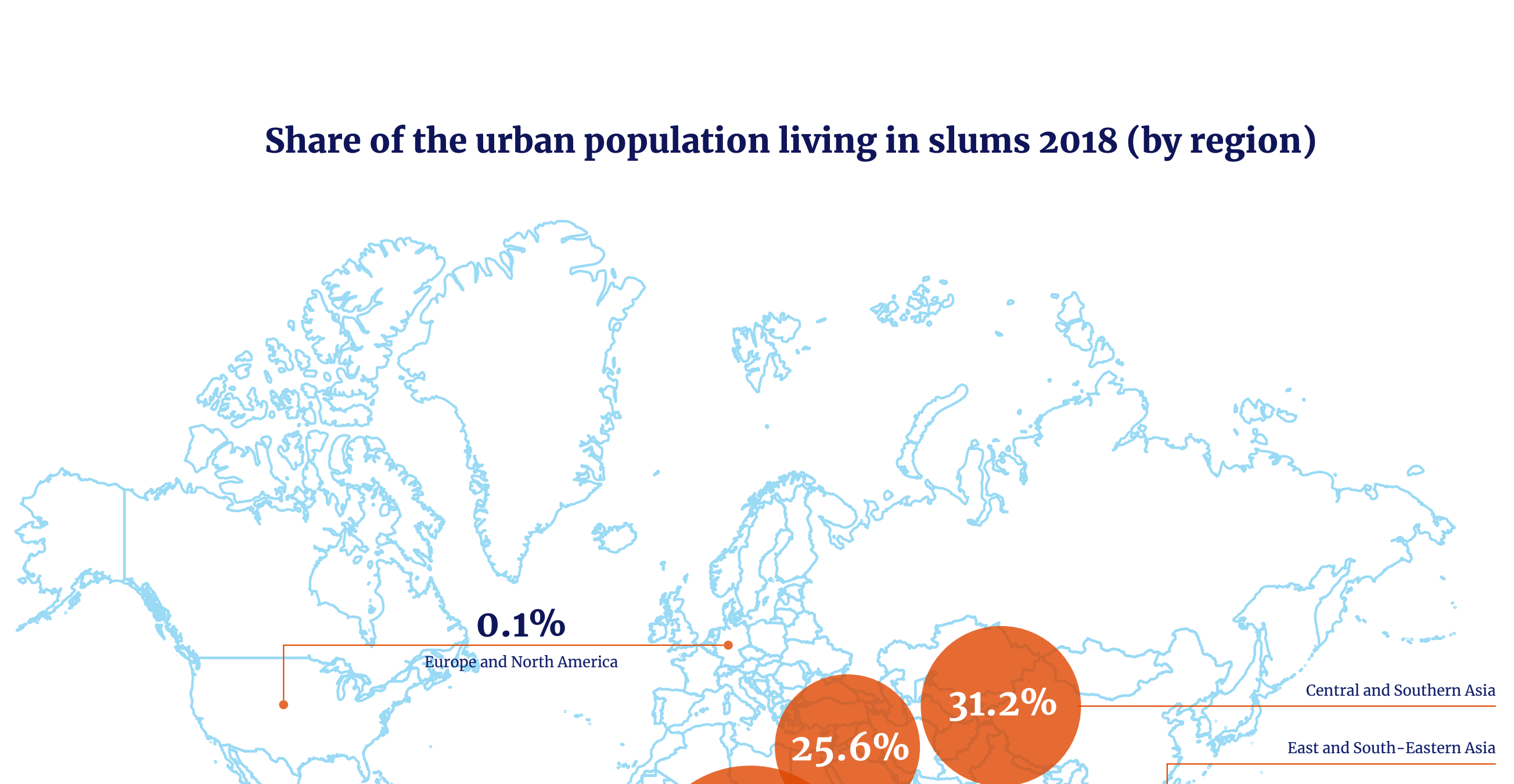
- Access to appropriate sanitary protection
- The use of safe and private places to change their sanitary protection and clean and dry it if necessary
- Education and support around good personal hygiene and disposal of sanitary waste
- Supportive environments at home, school and work



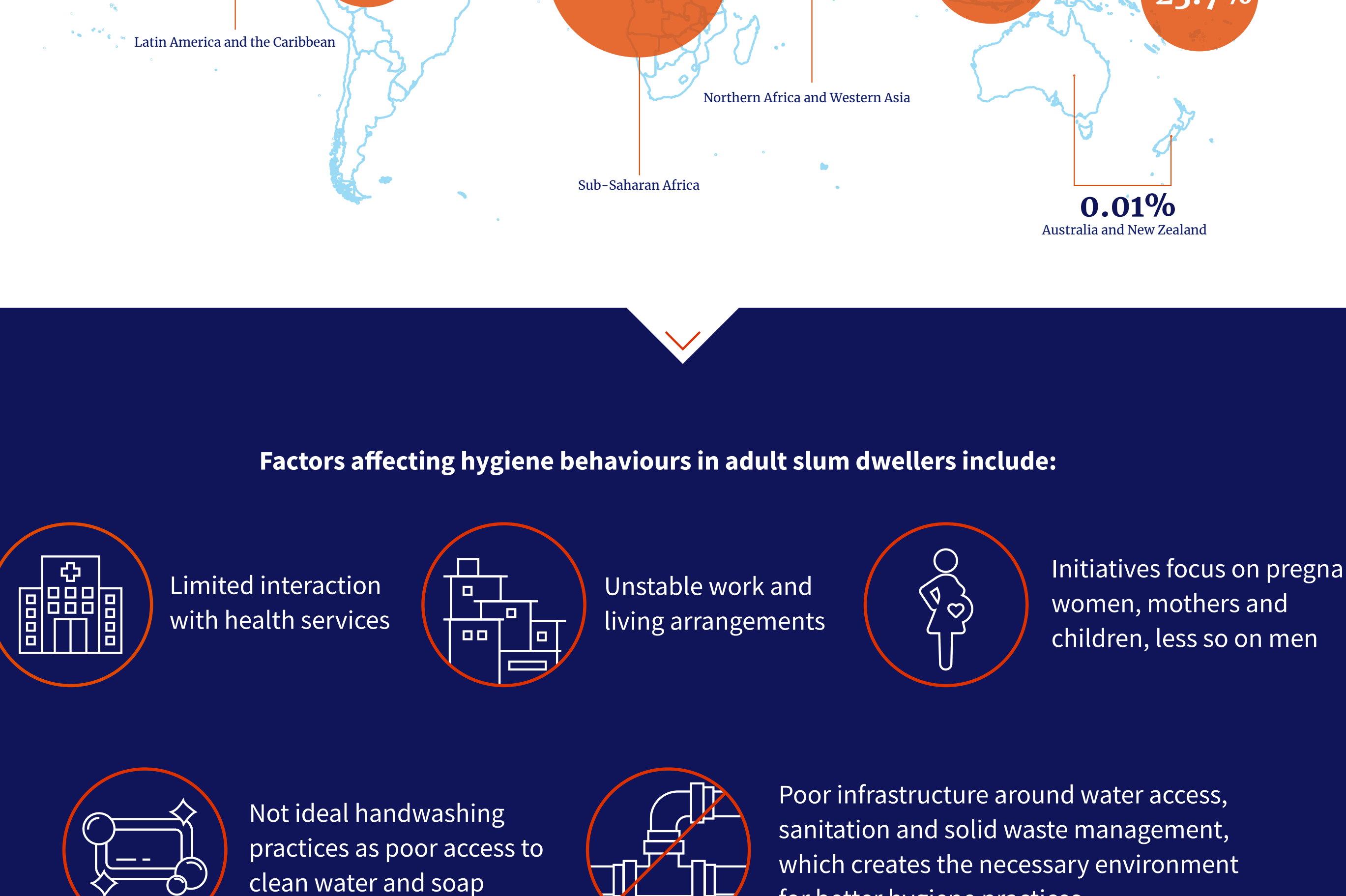
Adults

Adults are increasingly moving to urban areas for work, and in low and middle income countries a substantial number of people are living in informal or slum settlements. This population shift will affect access to WASH facilities and the ability to practise hygiene behaviours.

Urbanisation of the world (past, present and future)



Share of the urban population living in slums 2018 (by region)

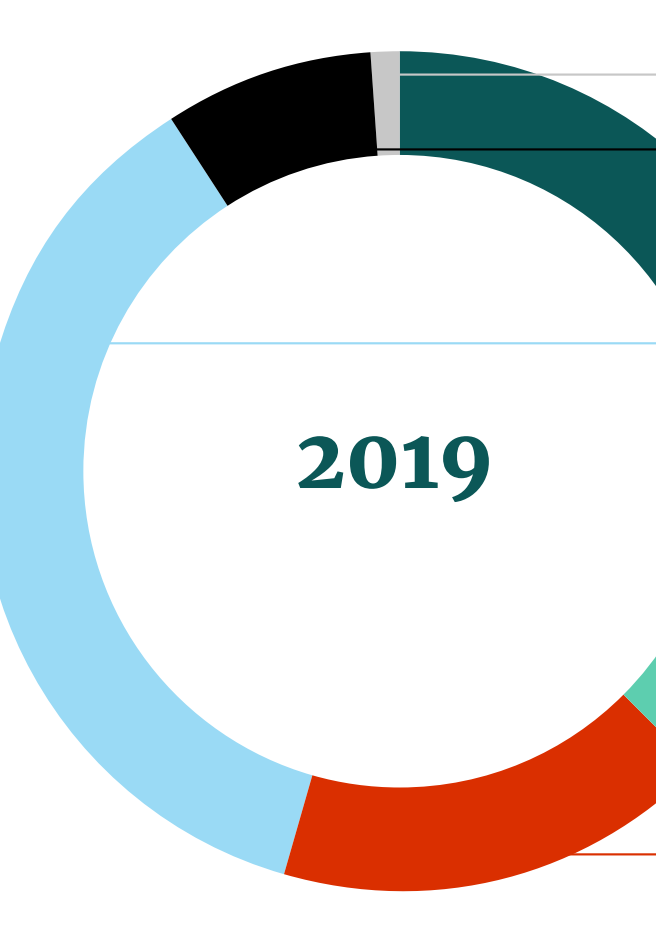

0.1%
Europe and North America
31.2%
Central and Southern Asia
East and South-Eastern Asia
25.6%
20.9%
Latin America and the Caribbean
56.2%
27.2%
23.7%
Oceania
Northern Africa and Western Asia
Sub-Saharan Africa
0.01%
Australia and New Zealand

Factors affecting hygiene behaviours in adult slum dwellers include:

- Limited interaction with health services
- Unstable work and living arrangements
- Initiatives focus on pregnant women, mothers and children, less so on men
- Not ideal handwashing practices as poor access to clean water and soap
- Poor infrastructure around water access, sanitation and solid waste management, which creates the necessary environment for better hygiene practices

Older people

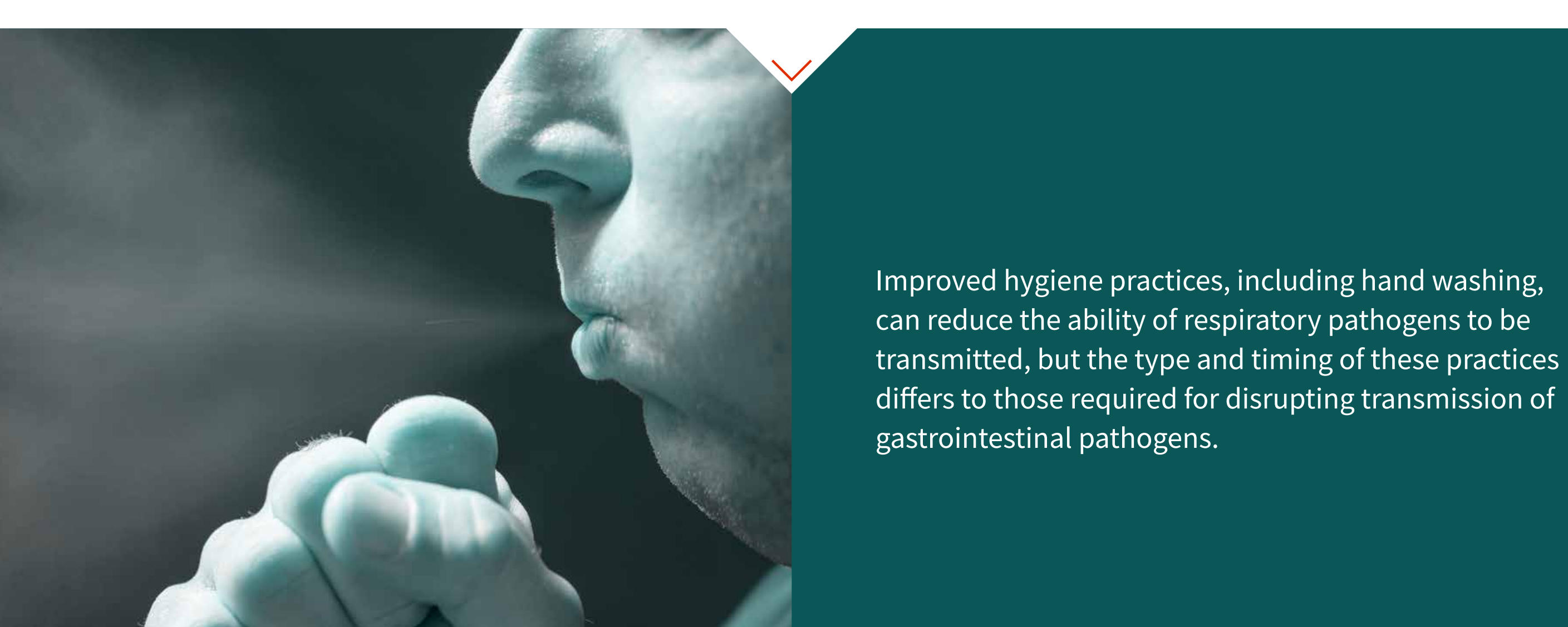
2020 marked the importance of hygiene standards for preventing respiratory infection. Older people were particularly affected by the covid-19 pandemic, making up most deaths.

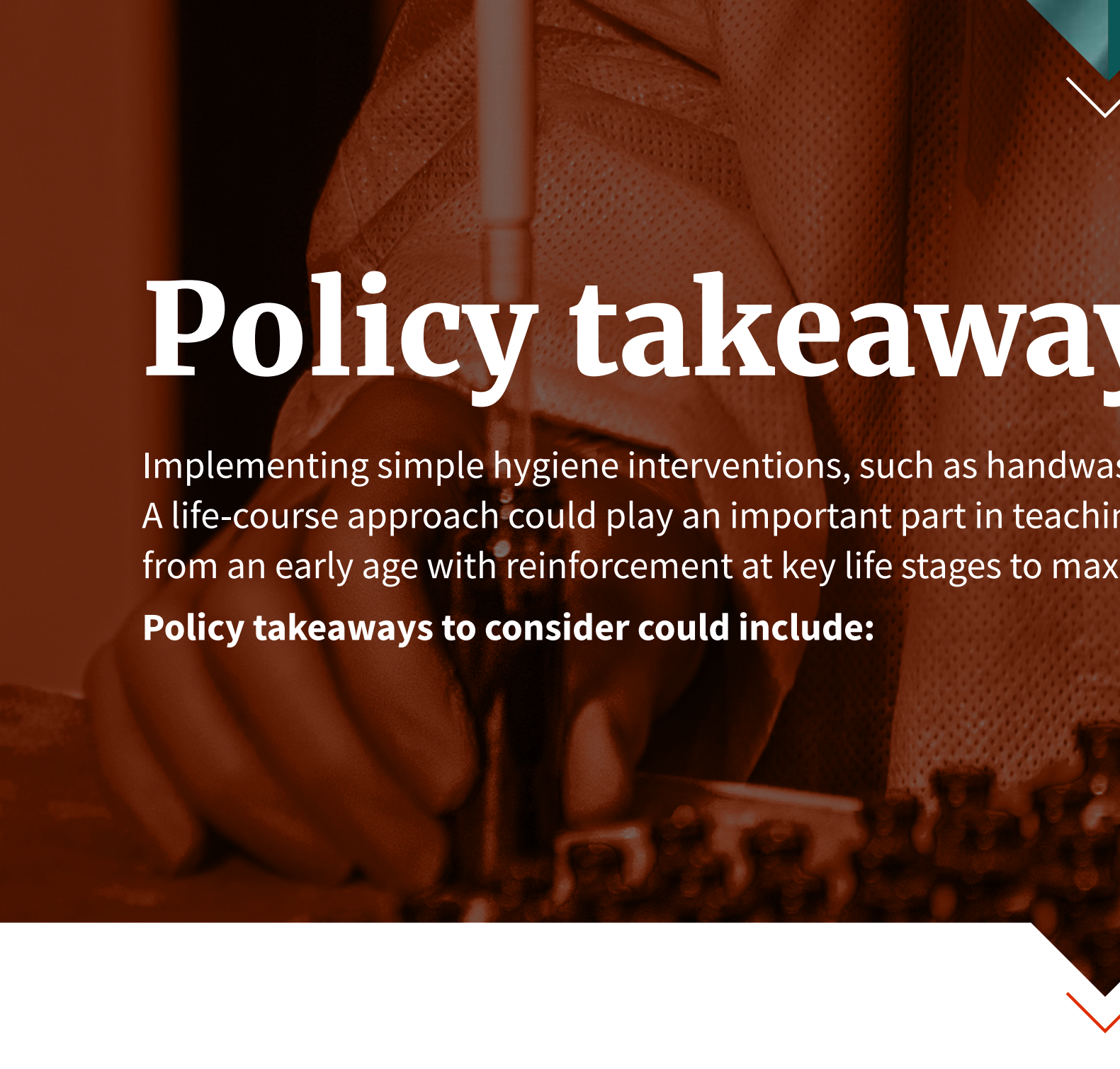


More than 90%

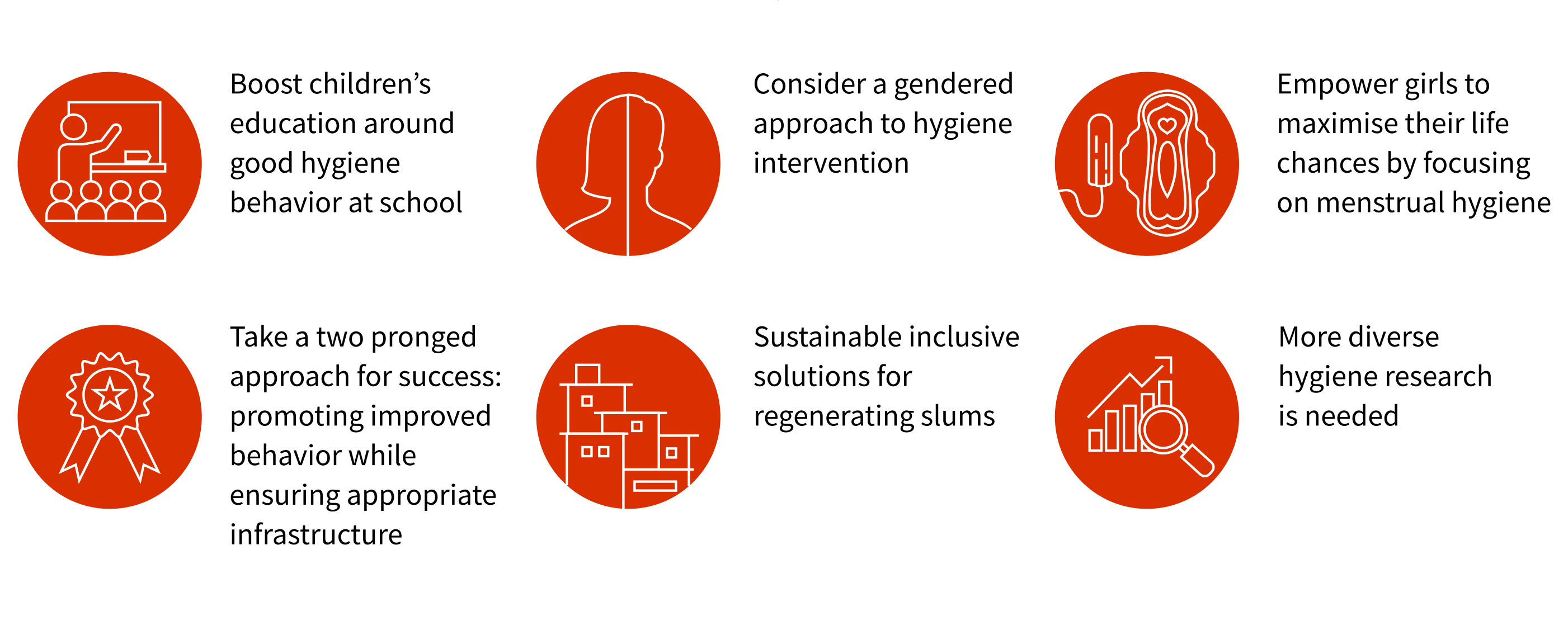
of covid-19 deaths in the US have occurred among those aged 55 or older. Over the 2000 to 2016 period, an ageing population has meant that numbers of lower respiratory tract deaths among the over 70s rose by 45% to 1,080,958.

Distribution of population aged 65 years or over by region, 2019 and 2050 (percentage)





Improved hygiene practices, including hand washing, can reduce the ability of respiratory pathogens to be transmitted, but the type and timing of these practices differs to those required for disrupting transmission of gastrointestinal pathogens.



Policy takeaways

Implementing simple hygiene interventions, such as handwashing with soap, can bring wide benefits to communities. A life-course approach could play an important part in teaching positive behaviors to reduce the spread of infections from an early age with reinforcement at key life stages to maximise benefits for individuals, societies and economies.

Policy takeaways to consider could include:

- Boost children's education around good hygiene behavior at school
- Consider a gendered approach to hygiene intervention
- Empower girls to maximise their life chances by focusing on menstrual hygiene
- Take a two pronged approach for success: promoting improved behavior while ensuring appropriate infrastructure
- Sustainable inclusive solutions for regenerating slums
- More diverse hygiene research is needed

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Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit. "A life-course approach to hygiene: understanding burden and behavioural changes" report, February 2021. Available at https://eiuperspectives.economist.com/healthcare/life-course-approach-hygiene-understanding-burden-and-behavioural-changes

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