



Women's Health | Program Fact Sheet



Jatu, Sierra Leone



Kumba, Sierra Leone



Yamah, Liberia

Lives transformed through hope and healing...



Patient Screening



Onboard Surgeries



Fistula Operation



Dress Celebration

About Obstetric Fistula

What is Obstetric Fistula?

Obstetric fistula is a preventable and mostly treatable condition that primarily affects young women in developing countries. Fistula is one of the most devastating of all pregnancy-related disabilities. Usually the result of obstructed labor coupled with a lack of access to skilled medical care, obstetric fistula most often leads to permanent incontinence – a continuous leakage of urine and, in severe cases, 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 or a caesarean section is performed. 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 often left outcast, living in a perpetual state of shame. Affected women are often abandoned by their husbands and ostracized by their families and communities.

Fistula Statistics (Source: WHO, 2018)

- The United Nations Population Fund estimates that every year between 50,000 and 100,000 women sustain an obstetric fistula during childbirth.
- The World Health Organization estimates that between 2-3 million women in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa are currently living with obstetric fistulas.
- 91% of vaginal fistula can be remedied surgically.
- Obstetric fistula is both preventable and treatable, a condition that no woman should have to endure.
- Poverty and lack of access to surgery are the primary indirect causes of obstetric fistula around the world.
- Obstructed labor and obstetric fistula account for 6% of maternal deaths worldwide.

Program Fact Sheet

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. In collaboration with local partners, Mercy Ships uses hospital ships to deliver transformational healthcare to the forgotten poor.

Fistula Repair Operations

Onboard our hospital ships, Mercy Ships performs free fistula repair operations for affected women.

Training & Prevention

To help build the capacity of healthcare systems in developing countries to address the condition of fistula, Mercy Ships networks with and provides training for local and 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 clothes soiled, their relationships lost. Patients who were healed participate in a celebration and receive new dresses and other gifts, symbolizing their restoration.

Obstetric Treatment Centers Established

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, with the capacity to treat up to 300 fistula patients per year. Today, this site also provides labor and delivery services, plus midwife training. In Madagascar, Mercy Ships helped establish a similar clinic in partnership with the Freedom from Fistula Foundation. That clinic opened in November of 2015.

Through all of the surgical programs, Mercy Ships has performed more than 105,500 life-changing or life-saving surgical procedures, including obstetric fistula repair.