



# Assessing the Impact of a School-Based Handwashing Programme on Absenteeism from Diarrhoea and Respiratory Illness in Arusha Primary Schools: A Cross-Sectional Survey

Amina Mwenda<sup>1,2</sup>, Juma Hassan<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Surgery, Ardhi University, Dar es Salaam

<sup>2</sup> National Institute for Medical Research (NIMR)

<sup>3</sup> Ardhi University, Dar es Salaam

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**Correspondence:** [amwenda@yahoo.com](mailto:amwenda@yahoo.com)

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## Author notes

*Amina Mwenda is affiliated with Department of Surgery, Ardhi University, Dar es Salaam and focuses on Medicine research in Africa.*

*Juma Hassan is affiliated with Ardhi University, Dar es Salaam and focuses on Medicine research in Africa.*

## Abstract

Diarrhoea and respiratory illnesses are leading causes of school absenteeism in low-resource settings. School-based handwashing with soap programmes are a recognised public health intervention, but evidence of their effectiveness in reducing absenteeism in the Tanzanian context is limited. This study aimed to assess the impact of a school-based handwashing with soap programme on absenteeism attributed to diarrhoea and respiratory illness among primary school pupils in Arusha, Tanzania. A cross-sectional survey was conducted across 20 primary schools in Arusha. Ten schools had implemented a structured handwashing with soap programme for at least one academic year, while ten served as controls. Data were collected via headteacher questionnaires on school infrastructure and via an analysis of randomly sampled pupil absentee records for cause-specific absenteeism over one academic term. Pupils in schools with the handwashing programme had significantly lower absenteeism rates. The mean absenteeism rate due to diarrhoea was 1.2 days per pupil per term in intervention schools, compared to 3.1 days in control schools. A similar, though less pronounced, reduction was observed for absenteeism due to respiratory illness. The school-based handwashing with soap programme was associated with a substantial reduction in absenteeism from diarrhoea and respiratory illness. This supports the role of such programmes as effective public health strategies within primary schools. Scale-up of evidence-based handwashing with soap programmes in primary schools across the region is recommended. Programmes should ensure consistent provision of soap and water and incorporate pupil education on hand hygiene practices. hand hygiene, school absenteeism, diarrhoea, respiratory infection, public health intervention, Tanzania This survey provides empirical evidence from Arusha, Tanzania, demonstrating the association between a school-based handwashing programme and reduced cause-specific absenteeism.

**Keywords:** *handwashing with soap, school absenteeism, diarrhoeal diseases, respiratory tract infections, Sub-Saharan Africa, cross-sectional studies, public health intervention*



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