ENGENDERHEALTH FACTS AND FIGURES
Although obstetric fistula is very rare in developed countries, more than 2 million women in the developing world suffer from fistula, a debilitating injury. This figure is most likely an underestimate, however, as the majority of fistula statistics come from health facilities, and an untold number of women suffering from fistula either cannot or do not seek treatment.

WHAT IS FISTULA?
Obstetric fistula is a childbirth injury caused by obstructed labor without medical intervention or cesarean section. It is an abnormal opening between the birth canal and the bladder and/or rectum. Iatrogenic fistula is a similar injury caused by medical accident. Traumatic gynecologic fistula can result from rape or other forms of sexual violence. Obstetric, iatrogenic, and traumatic fistula all result in chronic incontinence of urine and/or feces, and survivors may face abandonment by their husbands and social isolation from their families and communities.

WHAT ARE THE CONTRIBUTING FACTORS?
Poverty and lack of access to high-quality maternal health care contribute to obstetric fistula. Gender inequities and women’s low socioeconomic status increase a woman’s risk of developing fistula—with women often lacking the social power to make choices for themselves about health care and pregnancy. Malnutrition and low levels of education are exacerbating factors. Additionally, any woman living in a conflict-affected area is at increased risk of sexual violence and traumatic fistula.

While women of all ages and parity may develop obstetric fistula, it is most common among young women experiencing their first pregnancy, particularly in regions where early marriage is the norm. Women are often under pressure to bear children and prove their fertility at a young age. And when a young woman is not yet physically mature, her pelvis may be too small for safe delivery, which can lead to childbirth complications causing fistula.

To date, EngenderHealth has supported over 28,000 fistula repair surgeries, in partnership with institutions and medical teams in 14 countries.
CAN FISTULA BE TREATED?
A lack of understanding of the condition and social stigma mean that women with fistula frequently suffer in silence. Yet in up to 90% of cases, fistula can be surgically repaired. Most women who receive appropriate treatment can go on to have children, usually by cesarean delivery. Many barriers, however, prevent women from seeking treatment:

- Lack of awareness of a possible cure
- Sparse health facilities—many affected women live in remote areas, far from clinics
- Limited financial resources
- Shortage of skilled providers—developing countries often have very few surgeons and nurses trained in fistula repair
- Aversion to using hospitals—trust in the safety of services is often very low in poor areas, where hospitals are often viewed as places to die

At the same time, we know that when high-quality surgical repair becomes available and accessible, demand for services soars. Many women will travel for days to reach a hospital that has a surgeon who can perform fistula repair. And when women hear of a provider visiting their region, hundreds often turn up for a chance at a cure, revealing a large backlog.

ENGENDERHEALTH’S ROLE IN PREVENTING AND TREATING FISTULA
EngenderHealth is leading Fistula Care Plus, a five-year fistula repair and prevention project from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Fistula Care Plus builds on the work undertaken by the previous Fistula Care project (2007-2013) and supports safe and effective services that address the complex physical, emotional, and social dimensions of this tragic problem.

The Fistula Care Plus project provides:

- A strengthened enabling environment to institutionalize fistula prevention, treatment, and reintegration in the public and private sectors.
- Enhanced community understanding and practices to prevent fistula, improve access to fistula treatment, reduce stigma, and support reintegration of women and girls with fistula.
- Reduced transportation, communications, and financial barriers to accessing preventive care, detection, treatment, and reintegration support.
- Strengthened provider and health facility capacity to provide and sustain quality services for fistula prevention, detection, and treatment.
- Strengthened evidence base for approaches to improve fistula care and scaled-up application of standard monitoring & evaluation (M&E) indicators for prevention and treatment.

Our fistula work is broadly applicable in developing countries across the globe. We currently partner with international and local partners in six countries across sub-Saharan Africa and in Bangladesh.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
Visit fistulacare.org or contact info@engenderhealth.org.

EngenderHealth is a leading global women’s health organization committed to ensuring that every pregnancy is planned, every child is wanted, and every mother has the best chance at survival. In 20 countries around the world, we train health care professionals and partner with governments and communities to make high-quality family planning and sexual and reproductive health services available—today and for generations to come.