



# Healthcare under pressure: challenges facing the West Bank

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**Abstract:** Access to healthcare is a fundamental human right, yet the West Bank is facing a crisis. Salary shortages have pushed healthcare providers to strike, supplies are running low and deteriorating roads are limiting access. The international community must act now.

The right to health is not just a moral principle but a legal obligation recognised by international law. The World Health Organisation's constitution, adopted in [1946](#), affirms that enjoyment of the highest standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being, regardless of race, religion or political belief. whilst the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) ([Article 24](#)) and the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) ([Article 12](#)) go further, requiring that healthcare be available, accessible and continuous for all people.

In times of crisis, protecting this right becomes even more critical, because when health systems fail, people die. A child who cannot get medicine, a kidney patient who cannot reach a dialysis clinic, a mother turned away from a hospital are the direct result of a right that is not being protected. The right to health is connected to every other human right.

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Without it, the right to life and dignity means very little. In difficult times, a working health system is not a luxury, it is essential.

Palestine has signed the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) of which [Article 12](#) recognises the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health, Yet accessing healthcare has become increasingly difficult for Palestinians as women's rights activist Haneen explains:

For many people around the world, the right to health is not something they think about. It is simply part of daily life, taken for granted without a second thought. But for Palestinians in the West Bank, the challenge is not lack of awareness but access. Knowing you are entitled to care and being able to reach it are two very different things.

### **System under pressure on the ground**

The Palestinian Health Ministry has confirmed that hundreds of types of essential medicines are running critically low, including cancer treatments, dialysis drugs and other life-saving [medications](#). Thousands of planned surgeries have been [postponed](#) due to a lack of basic medical supplies. In May 2026, the Health Minister described what the Palestinian people were experiencing nowadays not merely as a humanitarian crisis or a health disaster but rather as a crisis of [survival](#) itself.

The [Ministry](#) affirmed that, despite unprecedented financial challenges, the Palestinian government is making intensive, round-the-clock efforts to prevent collapse of health services. These efforts include maximising the efficiency of available resources, prioritising urgent and essential healthcare needs and securing as many medicines, medical supplies and healthcare services as possible to ensure the continuity of care for citizens.

The West Bank's health system has structural weaknesses that make the current crisis even harder to manage. Hospital bed capacity stands at just [13.4](#) beds per 10,000 people, well below the global average of approximately 30 beds per 10,000. This puts enormous pressure on already stretched emergency rooms and intensive care units.

Non-communicable diseases are the leading cause of death in the West Bank, with heart disease, cancer and diabetes topping the list. The [cancer](#) rate alone stands at approximately 130.8 cases per 100,000 people, a figure that continues to place growing pressure on an already strained health system.

These conditions require regular, ongoing care and a steady supply of medication, the services being hit hardest by the crisis. When basic and preventive care breaks down, hospitals absorb even more pressure, creating a cycle that is very hard to break which puts the most vulnerable patients at greatest risk. Haneen said:

I am not only worried for myself in case I need healthcare in the future, but for my elderly parents and for every elderly person who may need care but under these difficult circumstances cannot easily access it.

## Impact on women's health

The West Bank healthcare crisis has a particularly severe impact on women. Maternal, sexual, and reproductive health services have been significantly disrupted, leaving many [pregnant](#) women without access to safe childbirth, emergency obstetric care, or essential medicines.

Women face serious obstacles just to reach a clinic, challenges that become life-threatening during pregnancy or labour. One woman from the West Bank described how during her earlier pregnancies, she visited a doctor in the nearby city of Qalqilya, but each visit was exhausting and [expensive](#).

Screening and treatment services for cervical and breast cancer have been largely suspended since October 2023, with access to family planning services, contraceptives, and testing and treatment for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) also limited. Additionally, more than 500,000 women and girls face [shortages](#) of menstrual hygiene materials and access to clean water. The impact on health on a daily basis pushes us to think about women and girls' quality of life, where access to the most basic healthcare is no longer guaranteed, a routine check-up becomes a burden, and fear of not being able to afford or reach medical care weighs on every woman, regardless of age or circumstance.

The deteriorating financial situation has also directly impacted healthcare workers themselves. Salary shortages have led to labour strikes by health providers, further disrupting already strained services and leaving patients without access to care at critical moments.

Haneen has felt the impact, generally and personally:

The deteriorating conditions...affect women's health first and foremost, not only physically but also psychologically and sexually. For three months I have been waiting for an appointment to schedule a surgery. Due to the ongoing labour strikes by health providers and my deteriorating financial situation, I am unable to have this operation.

## Filling the gap: Local activists and international humanitarian organisations

Haneen sees the positive influence of her work:

We work through campaigns on initiatives related to accessing currently available services for free, as well as how to cope under these circumstances, especially regarding mental health. And finally, we try to shed light on advocacy efforts to obtain and access health rights.

However, with the public health system under severe strain, international organisations have stepped in to try to maintain basic healthcare access for communities in need. The

World Health Organisation has been supporting the Ministry of Health with the procurement of [essential](#) medications and pre-positioning of supplies, while assessing functionality of health facilities across the West Bank. The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) has deployed mobile health teams and [midwives](#) to safe motherhood centres, reaching thousands of women who would otherwise have no access to reproductive healthcare.

Nonetheless, their role is a bridge, not a foundation. No matter how committed they are, NGOs and humanitarian groups cannot replace a real, functioning national health system. Short-term support treats symptoms, not the cause. People's right to health must be built on a stable, well-funded and accountable public system — not donors' goodwill or availability of outside help. The fact that so many organisations are needed is itself a sign of how serious the situation has become.

### **What needs to happen**

The challenges facing the healthcare system in the West Bank are serious, but they are not beyond repair. What is needed is genuine commitment, from institutions, governments and the international community to turn concern into action.

Human rights and civil society organisations play a vital role in documenting what is happening, raising awareness and advocating for rights of patients and healthcare workers. Their work on the ground is essential and must be supported consistently and sustainably, not just in moments of crisis but as long-term commitment to the people they serve.

At a broader level, the international community has both means and responsibility to act. This means ensuring that medicines and medical supplies reach patients without delay, supporting financial stability of the health system. Statements of concern are not enough, what Palestinian patients need is concrete, sustained and coordinated action.

Ultimately, healthcare is not a political issue. It is a human one. Every person in the West Bank, regardless of their circumstances, deserves access to reliable, dignified care, when they need it. Protecting that right is not optional. It is a shared responsibility that the international community must take seriously.