

# Deaths from snake bites

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Deaths from snake bites have become an annual nightmare in parts of Nigeria, especially in Plateau and Gombe States. For instance, in 2017 about 250 persons died in the two states as a result of snake bites, causing panic in the country and abroad. Government and international aid agencies rushed to the region with medical aid for treatment of victims.

In the last few weeks, there have been reports of fresh snake bites which have led to the death of 24 persons out of 1,829 reported snake bite cases in Gombe State alone. The officer-in-charge of the Snake Bite

Treatment and Research Centre in Kaltungo, Gombe State, Abubakar Ballah said, “The cases (of snake bites) are on the increase because of the downpour which dislodges snakes from their holes to seek higher ground because they do not like wet environment. They climb trees, maize or millet to keep away from water; that is the reason why people are severely bitten.” He said apart from farmers, herdsmen who climb trees to cut leaves for their livestock are also at risk as well as those who go to the bush to fetch firewood.

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Snake bites are not peculiar to Nigeria. But over the years, countries have devised peculiar means of tackling the menace. For instance, in India, researchers have found a way of combining traditional and orthodox medical methods in the production of antidotes to snake venoms. Because snakes are of different species and the venoms they produce are different, there is a challenge before Nigerian researchers to discover and produce the kinds of anti-snake venom to deal with our peculiar situation. To do this requires identifying the species of snakes that infest Plateau, Gombe and other areas prone to snake bite and providing the resources that would enable experts to come up with drugs that can neutralise identified snake venoms.

Although humans generally regard snakes as dangerous pests, they are very useful in maintaining the overall balance of our environment by keeping the numbers of rats and other pests in check. Therefore, the challenge before farmers, herders and other Nigerians is how to de-pestify their environments, including agricultural farms, in such a way that they are not exposed to snakes and snake bites.

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One of the reasons why many have died of snake bites is the ignorance as to what to do when bitten by snakes. Mr Ballah said, “We are calling on their relatives to stop giving snake bite victims herbs because some of the herbs cause the person to vomit, thereby making the condition to deteriorate. The only first aid you can give to a snake bite patient is paracetamol and then you rush him to the hospital.” If this is the case, there is need to engage in public enlightenment in areas that are prone to snake bites.

It is necessary to teach Nigerians what to do when they are bitten by snakes. Those who go to farms should wear protective gears like boots, so that their legs are not exposed to the reptiles. They should be trained on how to use eye glasses when they work in the bush because some snakes can precisely target glistening eyeballs and render victims totally blind.

In addition, it is important to enlighten the people on the need to quickly go to the hospital for prompt medical attention. Some snake venoms are very potent and if there is delay in reaching the hospital, they could inflict maximum damage or even kill the snake bite victim. This also demands that in primary healthcare centres in areas prone to snake bites, government should ensure that snake anti-venoms are available for instant use. If victims cannot access such drugs they would resort to the use of herbs. Furthermore, Nigerians need to be enlightened on how to manage their environments and keep snakes at bay.