

Snakebite Awareness Training

Part 2: Lesson 10 - Healer or Hospital?

If you live in rural Kenya and you have a health problem, you are likely to go to the traditional healer. Traditional healers offer holistic treatments for physical, mental, and spiritual ailments. Often there are beliefs that snakebite is a result of a spiritual problem, such as witchcraft, curses, or sinful behaviors. You may choose to go to the traditional healer because they are more accessible, cost less than going to the hospital, and some of the remedies work for various types of ailments.



Herbs for traditional healing

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It should be noted that if you are bitten by a snake that you know for sure is not venomous, you can keep the wound clean and it will heal on its own. If you are bitten by a mildly venomous snake, you may have some pain, swelling, and maybe itching at the site of the bite, but you will likely heal on your own. However, if you are bitten by a highly dangerous snake, including but not limited to a boomslang, mamba, cobra, puff adder, or carpet viper, you will need medical treatment as fast as possible. ***If you are unable to identify the snake that bit you, you must assume it is a bite from a highly venomous snake and you must get to a hospital quickly for treatment.***

In stories from snakebite victims about visiting a traditional healer, treatments for snakebite may consist of the following; the healer spits on the wound or cuts the wound; the healer tries to suck out the poison; an herbal treatment is applied or swallowed; a black stone is placed on the wound; the healer suggests eating paraffin or raw eggs to help treat the effects of the bite; or application of a tourniquet. ***There is no evidence to indicate that these things will have any positive effect*** on a bite from a highly dangerous, venomous snake. Furthermore, these types of remedies can actually ***add to the harm*** being caused by the snakebite. Certain herbs may help with reducing pain, but that does not counteract the harm caused by the venom to your nerves, cells and tissues, or blood.. If applying a black stone helps to keep you calm and your heart rate slower, this will help keep the venom from spreading faster - but does nothing to absorb the venom.

When it comes to a bite from a highly venomous snake (mambas, cobras, vipers, puff adders, night adders, and others), the remedies of the traditional healer cannot help you. The poison from a snake can make its way through your body rapidly, and the parts of the body it affects can start shutting down. To repeat, the remedies of

the traditional healer are not effective against venomous snakebites. ***If you are bitten by a venomous snake, you are risking your life if you do not get to a hospital immediately for proper medical care and hopefully antivenom.*** Taking time to go to a traditional healer will only increase your risk of dying or losing a limb.

Traditional healers can play a very important role in snakebite cases by referring people with obvious signs and symptoms of severe envenomation to a local hospital. We encourage any community engaged in snakebite prevention to work with the traditional healers to help them understand the symptoms of snakebite and to act as a link between the victim and the hospitals.

Reminder: If you've been bitten by a venomous snake in Kenya you can call an emergency services number at +254 729403599 for additional help