

# WHO unveils plan to tackle global snakebite 'emergency'

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Saw-scaled Viper (*Echis carinatus*). Credit: Wikipedia

The World Health Organization on Thursday unveiled a new strategy to

dramatically cut deaths and injuries from snakebites, warning a dearth of antivenoms could soon spark a "public health emergency".

Each year, nearly three million people are bitten by poisonous snakes, with an estimated 81,000-138,000 deaths. Another 400,000 survivors suffer permanent disabilities and other after-effects, according to WHO figures.

In a new report, the UN health agency urged the international community to take steps to address the problem, which it warned had long been dangerously under-estimated and neglected.

WHO, which two years ago categorised "snakebite envenoming" as a Neglected Tropical Disease, presented a strategy aimed at cutting snakebite-related deaths and disabilities in half by 2030.

Snake venom can cause paralysis that stops breathing, bleeding disorders that can lead to fatal haemorrhage, irreversible kidney failure and tissue damage that can cause permanent disability and limb loss.

Most snakebite victims live in the world's tropical and poorest regions, and children are worse affected due to their smaller body size.

An important part of the strategy is to significantly boost production of quality antivenoms, WHO said.

Production of life-saving antivenoms has been abandoned by a number of companies since the 1980s, and availability of effective and safe products is disastrously low in Africa especially, with a similar crisis also looming in Asia.

"Without urgent reshaping of the market, greater regulatory control and other measures, a public health emergency is imminent," the WHO

report warned.

The UN agency called for "the restoration of a sustainable market for snakebite treatment", insisting on the need for a 25-percent increase in the number of competent manufacturers by 2030.

WHO said it planned a pilot project to create a global antivenom stockpile.

The strategy also called for integrating snakebite treatment and response into national health plans in affected countries, including better training of health personnel and educating communities.

The Doctors Without Borders charity praised the strategy, saying it "could be a turning point" in tackling snakebite poisoning, which it said "kills more people than any other disease on WHO's Neglected Tropical Diseases list."

"The toll that snakebite envenoming takes on people around the world truly represents a hidden epidemic," MSF Tropical Medicine Advisor Gabriel Alcoba said in a statement.

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