

SNAKEBITES IN ZAMBIA:

EXPERTS DEBUNK MYTHS AND URGE GREATER PUBLIC AWARENESS

SNAKE Safety Zambia Director Marcel van Driel has challenged several common myths surrounding snakes while highlighting the growing public health burden posed by snakebites in Zambia.

Speaking on snakebite prevention and safety, Van Driel said there is no scientific basis for believing that babies, pregnant women or breastfeeding mothers are protected from snakebites.

"First of all, babies do get bitten by snakes and they sometimes do get killed by snakes. There's no reason whatsoever to assume that a baby, even when it smells of baby milk, would not be bitten.

There's no reason to assume that a baby, toddler or small child would not be bitten by a snake if the snake feels threatened."

He said pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers are equally vulnerable and should seek immediate medical attention if bitten.

Motor oil does not repel snakes

Van Driel also dismissed the long-standing belief that pouring used motor oil around homes keeps snakes away.

"People believe a lot of things about snake repellents. Scientific research conducted by the Alexander Laboratories at the University of the Witwatersrand, as well as similar studies in Namibia and the United States, has shown that nothing repels snakes."

He added that snakes are regularly found inside vehicle engine compartments.

"The case against the motor oil myth is very simple. I've removed countless snakes from engine bays of vehicles. If snakes disliked the smell of oil, why would they hide inside vehicle engines? There is even a viral video showing a large black-necked spitting cobra being removed from a vehicle in Lusaka."

Can snakes move on tiles?

Another common misconception is that snakes cannot move across tiled floors.

Van Driel explained that while some species struggle on smooth surfaces, many snakes are still able to move across tiles.

"For a lot of snake species it's more difficult to move around on tiles because they don't get much grip. Especially faster-moving snakes like black mambas and sand snakes need traction to move efficiently. However, many snakes, including cobras and puff adders, can still move on tiled surfaces."

Understanding venomous snakes

Van Driel said Zambia is home to a wide variety of snake species with varying levels of danger.

"The snakes that can potentially kill a human being include cobras, mambas, puff adders, Gaboon adders, boomslangs and twig snakes. However, these bites are potentially deadly if medical treatment is not received."

He said other venomous snakes can still cause serious injury.

"Species such as stiletto snakes and night adders are venomous, but their venom is generally not strong enough to kill a person. However, they can cause severe tissue damage, including necrosis, and if poorly managed, victims can even lose part of a finger."

He noted that mildly venomous snakes usually cause little or no noticeable illness, while non-venomous snakes generally cause only minor injuries.

Zambia records thousands of snakebites every year

Van Driel said snakebite remains a major public health issue.

"We don't have comprehensive national data, but Ministry of Health statistics between 2020 and 2025 indicate between 20, 000 and 25, 000 snakebite cases every year."

He said the actual figures are likely much higher.

"The World Health Organisation estimates that only about 30 percent of snakebite cases are reported. Many victims never reach hospitals, seek treatment from traditional healers, or die before accessing medical care."

Using WHO estimates, he said Zambia could be recording as many as 66, 000 snakebite incidents annually.

He also referred to recent research conducted in Mozambique.

"Researchers combined hospital records with community surveys over a ten-year period. When those findings are applied to Zambia's rural population of about 10 million people, we estimate more than 36, 500 snakebite incidents every year."

According to Van Driel, around 4, 500 to 5, 000 of those bites are potentially life-threatening.

"These are bites from snakes such as puff adders, Gaboon adders, mambas and cobras that inject venom capable of causing death if left untreated."

He warned that snakebite leaves many survivors with permanent disabilities.

"More than a thousand amputations are likely performed every year because of snakebite. Many survivors also lose mobility in their hands or feet, while others suffer long-term psychological trauma and live in constant fear after their experience."

He added that snakebite has major economic consequences.

"When the victim is the family's breadwinner, particularly a rural farmer, losing the use of a hand or foot means they can no longer fully support their family. Snakebite is therefore both a health issue and a socio-economic problem."

Where people are most often bitten

Van Driel said snakebite statistics show a clear pattern.

"Around 80 percent of snakebite incidents occur on the feet and lower legs. Between 15 and 20 percent occur on the hands and forearms, while the remaining five percent affect other parts of the body."

He said these figures demonstrate the importance of protecting the body's most vulnerable areas.


Testing to repel a Puff Ader with onion and garlic

Preventing snakebites

Van Driel urged members of the public to take practical precautions whenever entering areas where snakes may occur.

"When you go into areas where snakes may be found, such as national parks, farms or the bush, always wear protective footwear. When walking at night, use a torch so you can see any snake movement. Never walk through tall grass because that is where snakes often hide, and never place your hands into dark places such as holes, under rocks or inside hollow logs where you cannot see what is inside."

He stressed that awareness, prevention and prompt medical treatment remain the best defence against snakebite and can save lives.


A Travancore Wolf Snake moving on tiles