

It is estimated that around 6,429 people live with podoconiosis in Rwanda, but health services for these particular patients are almost nonexistent.

Podoconiosis is a disease similar to, but clinically distinct, from elephantiasis. It is characterized by severe swelling of the feet and legs and it progressively affects genetically susceptible people who do not wear shoes in volcanic soil.

According to the UN health watchdog, podoconiosis is more widespread in Africa, Central America and north-west India.

In Rwanda, the disease predominantly affects farmers in the districts of Musanze and Gicumbi, Nyamasheke, Karongi, and Gisagara..

Mr Jean Rukunda, 46, a resident of Kayonza district who suffers from the disease, says that he had never seen this disease until he became the victim.

The livestock keeper notes that It is now over 9 years with this disease, he adds that it gives him sleepless nights because most of the time, his legs are itching.

“This disease cannot allow me to do gardening or look after my cattle because I am always experiencing pain in my legs which feel like burning hence scratching my legs” He says

“Some times, the pain intensifies, and I leave all the activities to my wife I am doing and start scratching my legs,” he added.

Rukundo says that he has tried all kinds of treatments but none of the modern and traditional medicines has helped.

“Doctors have given him several different drugs, taken my blood samples but there is no change. They now advise me to always wear stockings, gumboots or shoes to avoid getting contact with the soil.” he further adds.

Rukundo is not alone, Epiphanie, 30, has suffered from podoconiosis and contracted the disease when she was five years old. She describes it as a scratchy painful feeling that began in her right leg.

Eventually, her condition became so serious that she was unable to continue working in the fields as a farmer; she was advised to visit HASA, a non-profit organization located in Musanze District whose vision it is to eliminate podoconiosis.

For nearly ten years, she has been receiving treatment from HASA that has provided her a place to soak her feet.

Thanks to continuous treatment, her life is no longer dictated by podoconiosis. Now, she is able to support her family by working with her hands and staying out of the fields so as not to aggravate her condition.

Jean Damascène Habanabakike, who suffers from podoconiosis sickness locally known as Imidido, says that he contracted the disease when he was young.

“I grew up sick but the place where I was treated is slowly recovering and it is not the same as before”. He adds.

Dr Jean Bosco Mbonigaba the head of the department responsible for combating neglected diseases at the National Health Center (RBC) urges residents in the Northern Province to wash their feet well and wear shoes to prevent infections.

“The reason why such diseases affect people in the North is because the soil contains minerals that penetrate the skin and cause the body to develop inflammation. People should know how to properly wash their feet, wear shoes and be clean” He explains.

Medical experts have also added that it is possible to prevent podoconiosis disease by seeking treatment, washing feet with soap and water regularly, and wearing protective shoes consistently.

Heart and Sole Africa (HASA), the only one organization that provides health care services to those affected by podoconiosis in Rwanda. It has now registered 530 patients and those patients receive free of charge health care and socioeconomic services.

Today, more than 100 patients have received soaps, brushes, footfiles and socks to be able to take care of their condition.

The organization does not only provide patients with treatment but also skills development. Among them is the Shoe show project, where all shoes are made by patients under podoconiosis treatment. The other is a sewing fashionable bag project, where retained patients are given start up packages to run their own business.