

NEWS

Ugandan authorities deal with a mysterious ailment that leaves people nodding continuously

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Kampala

Ugandan health authorities have launched strategies to deal with a strange disease that has left dozens of people dead in the north of the country and 3000 others, mostly children, nodding continuously.

The ailment, which was first detected in 2009, has mostly affected people in the three districts of Kitgum, Lamwo, and Pader but has also spread in recent weeks to two other districts of Agago and Amuru. Those affected become severely weak, have trembling hands, go into cognitive decline, and continuously nod their heads.

The health ministry says it has no record of deaths from the disease but reports from newspapers including East Africa's largest publication, *The Daily Nation*, say at least 100 people have died from the condition in recent weeks.

According to the acting resident representative of the World Health Organization in Kampala, Solomon Fisseha, the disease dubbed the "nodding syndrome" is a form of "severe epilepsy" and is most likely to have been caused by nutritional deficiencies.

"It is a type of epileptic disorder, and it could be a result of nutritional deficiencies. There are also similarities with river blindness, but as of now there is no conclusive evidence to establish the cause," Dr Fisseha told the *BMJ*.

Lawrence Ojom, the director for Kitgum Hospital in the Acholi region of northern Uganda, told the *BMJ* that "there are many patients being brought for treatment but there are many more in the community."

The WHO says that the disease was first detected in neighbouring Tanzania in the 1960s and later in Southern Sudan. Appropriate nutritional support is required to stem the disease, which is not contagious, said Dr Fisseha.

The health ministry, which launched an investigation into the disease last week, said that it has no conclusive evidence about the cause of the disease saying it is a "form of advanced epilepsy."

The ministry has drawn up a plan that will soon be implemented to include research into treatment, procurement of drugs, training of community health workers, and educating the public about nutrition and administering drugs.

The project according to Rukia Nakamatte, the ministry spokesperson, includes mobilising villagers by community workers on nutritional standards and the provision of urgent nutritional kits for affected families.

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