

EHF boss warns against plant toxicity

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DR Henry Lowe, executive chairman of the Environmental Health Foundation (EHF), Saturday cautioned Jamaicans against the potentially toxic effects of plants, noting that people too often gave little thought to this reality.

"Jamaica has been blessed by having 85 of the 120 best known medicinal plants in the world, but at the same time, we have some of the most dangerous plants in the world," Lowe said in an address to the second annual scientific conference of the Caribbean Poison Information Network (CARPIN).

His warning comes at a time when more than 60 per cent of the island's population reportedly continue to use bush medicines and consume bush tea. This is so while some 464 cases of poisoning related to other substances were reported last year.

The majority of those cases (572) were reported in the under five age group, according to Dr Jean Williams-Johnson, director of the Emergency Medicine Division at the University Hospital of the West Indies, who gave the statistics.

Williams-Johnson said that 31 per cent of the total cases were caused by bleach, while over-the-counter (OTC) drugs accounted for 21 per cent of the cases. Kerosene and pesticides, she said, accounted for 15 per cent.

Lowe, meanwhile, noted that among the most common poisonous plants on the island were:

- . desert rose (Addenium) and periwinkle (Catharanthus roseus);
- . neem (aradirachta indica) and oleander (Nerium oleander) ;
- . ackee (Blighia sapida) and cassava (Manihot esculenta);
- . physic nut tree (Jatropha curcas) and guango (Samanea saman); as well as
- . love bush (Cassytha filiformis) and pomegranate (Punica granatum).

Signs of poisoning include:

- . gastroenteritis leading to vomiting and diarrhoea as the body tries to prevent excessive absorption and expel the substance; and
- . impact on various organs of the body, which might lead to morbidity and mortality.

The procedures to follow in case of accidental poisoning by any of these plants, Lowe said, were to consult a caregiver or poison centre; and to take as much of the toxic plant, if identified/found, to the poison centre.

Failing that, he advised the use of the universal antidote for poisoning - activated charcoal; the drinking of a strong cup of tea; or vomiting.

"Vomiting is always a good thing," he said, noting that it should not be inhaled and the head should be hung downwards.