

Musa Nzimakwe was 18 years old when he contracted cholera two years ago. He had just finished his electrical engineering exams at a technical college in Durban, and had gone to his rural home between Margate and Post Shepstone in late November. One week later he was seriously ill with cholera.

Louise Torr tells the story.

In Durban Musa has access to clean, piped water. At his rural home, domestic water is obtained from a stream, which is supplied by a spring. This stream runs through Musa's homestead, and at places the water is stagnant. Sometimes the water is yellowish green, with frogs, but this is the water that his mother and rest of the community collect for domestic consumption. Until recently people used the bushes when they needed to defecate.

Musa had been helping to build a fence, and used to drink water straight from the stream whenever he felt thirsty, which is what every-

one does in that area. In addition, Musa is a soccer player, and whenever he came home after playing, he would drink plenty of water from the stream. His mother, sister and two brothers did not get ill because they did not drink as much as he did – also in Durban he was used to drinking water that was safe. His family was very worried and confused when he became ill, and they gave him plenty of water to drink, but it was water from the same stream.

Soon Musa began to lose his appetite. Three days later he had diarrhoea, but he did not go to the clinic as he thought it would pass.

He felt terrible – everything he ate passed through him – he had diarrhoea and vomited, and could not keep anything inside. The makeshift toilet was far from the house, and he needed to get there about 15 times a day. Sometimes he could not get to the toilet in time. His mother brought a bowl to wash him. He felt terrible and began to lose hope. He lost a lot of weight and his mother had to carry him to the clinic.

By the time he got to the clinic, he had no energy. He was given glucose, and a letter of admission to Port Shepstone hospital. He stayed in hospital for a week, and was on an intravenous drip for a few days.

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HOW TO TREAT AND PREVENT CHOLERA

When people have diarrhoea and lose a lot of fluids, it is important to give them a sugar/salt solution to drink as often as they can. This home solution stops their bodies from drying out. To one litre of clean water, add 8 teaspoons of sugar and half a teaspoon of salt.

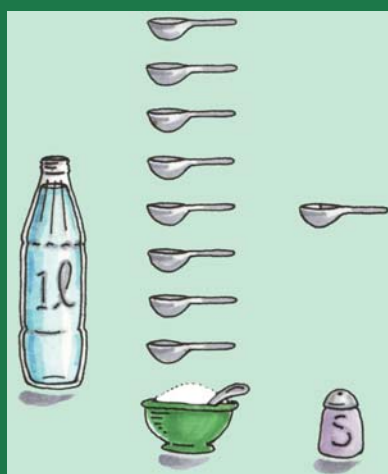
We can all work hard to prevent cholera if we:

- ◆ Make sure that human faeces do not get into the water that we drink.
- ◆ Make drinking water safe. Add one teaspoon of Jik (or other bleach) to 25 litres of water. Let it stand overnight, or for two hours at least, to clean the water properly and to kill the cholera germs. Water can also be boiled to make it clean.
- ◆ Wash hands with soap after going to the toilet, and after changing a baby's nappy.
- ◆ Wash hands with soap and water before preparing or eating food.



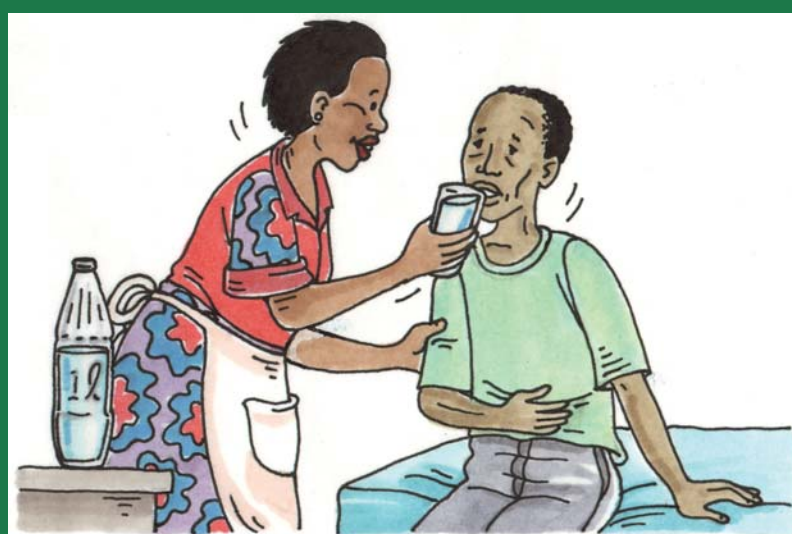
Make drinking water safe:

- ◆ Add one teaspoon of Jik (or other bleach) to 25 litres of water.
- ◆ Let it stand overnight, or for two hours at least, to clean the water properly and to kill the cholera germs.



Make a home solution for people who have diarrhoea:

- ◆ To one litre of clean water, add 8 teaspoons of sugar and half a teaspoon of salt.



Give this sugar/salt solution to people with diarrhoea to drink as often as they can.


*Illustrations supplied by SANTAG
(KwaZulu-Natal Sanitation Task Group).
Artwork by Hildegard van Zyl.*

Thereafter he was given healthy food, plenty of liquid and fruit. On the seventh day, he was much better and discharged.

CHOLERA

People know that cholera is bad, but Musa thinks that they are not aware that cholera is caused by bad sanitation habits. Since last year the uGu District Municipality has supplied toilets to this area, badly affected by cholera, but this has not been accompanied by an education campaign. No workshops have been held to educate people about the connection between bad sanitation, contaminated drinking water and cholera. People are still drinking unsafe water from the stream. They do not realise that it has to be purified – they generally do not boil their drinking water, nor do they cleanse it with Jik. Earlier this year, handpumps were installed in the vicinity, but people still use the water from the stream because they have to walk too far to collect water from the handpump.

It seems that people in the area seem to know more about the ways that HIV/AIDS is spread than they know about how cholera is contracted. But they show the same indifference, and do not take precautions.

Musa, however, learnt the hard way. He will not drink water from that stream again. 

FOR SALE

'A field classification system for the wetlands of the Western Cape'

by Genevieve Jones & Jenny Day, produced by the Freshwater Research Unit at UCT, in conjunction with WWF(SA).

For sale at R80 including postage.

Contact Ms C April at ccoulsen@botzoo.uct.ac.za or write to the Freshwater Research Unit, Zoology Dept, University of Cape Town, Rondebosch 7701, Western Cape.

CHOLERA CAN SPREAD DURING SUMMER HOLIDAYS

Over the past few years KwaZulu-Natal has been hit by outbreaks of cholera during the December holidays. The disease can spread easily with the movement of people during the summer holidays, because people spread the disease.

Not everyone will get cholera. People with clean piped water will not get cholera, but those who do not have clean, safe drinking water can get cholera if the water is infected with cholera germs. These germs are found in human faeces. Communities can easily get cholera in areas where the toilets are badly constructed, and the human waste can contaminate their drinking water. If they defecate in the bushes, their faeces can wash into the river when it rains. If the water is made dirty by human faeces, the cholera germs will grow and spread.

When heavy rains fall and the weather is hot, cholera germs can grow and spread very quickly. When the weather gets cool and dry, these germs can stay sleeping in water for many years. They will grow again when it gets hot and spread when the rivers flow after rain.

People who drink infected water and get cholera, suffer from diarrhoea and vomiting. If the body fluids that they lose are not replaced quickly enough, they can die. During last year's cholera epidemic the Health Department helped to stop people from dying of cholera. People in cholera areas were given Jik to clean their water, and clean water was brought to cholera areas. Emergency clinics or rehydration centres were set up, where people with cholera were given extra fluids to replace those lost from diarrhoea and vomiting.