

The Republic of South Sudan



Ministry of Health
Office of the Undersecretary



October 18th, 2023

PRESS STATEMENT
JUBA, SOUTH SUDAN

SUBJECT: MINISTRY OF HEALTH STATEMENT ON DECLARATION OF TUNGIASIS
OUTBREAK IN LOBONE, EASTERN EQUATORIA STATE

Tungiasis, commonly known as Jiggers is a parasitic skin infection due to infestation with adult female sand flea, *Tunga penetrans*. The larvae and pupae develop in dry shaded soils, mostly inside the sleeping rooms of houses with an unsealed earthen floor where most transmission occurs.

It occurs in marginalized, resource-poor populations in the tropics of the Caribbean, South America and sub-Saharan Africa. Tungiasis thrives where living conditions are precarious, such as villages located in remote communities in the rural areas. In these settings, the poorest of the poor carry the highest burden of the disease.

Over 1 billion people live in areas suitable for transmission of tungiasis but no country conducts routine surveillance so the actual disease burden is not known. However, within endemic communities, surveys have reported prevalence from 7% to 63%, i.e., distribution is heterogeneous. Elderly people and children aged 5–14 years, particularly boys, are at highest risk. People with disabilities are also highly vulnerable to infection.

The negative impacts of tungiasis are real. The disease can cause immense pain and itching. This disturbs sleep and concentration on school or work. Patients with large numbers of embedded fleas have difficulty walking, often with loss of nails and disfigured and mutilated feet. People with tungiasis experience stigma and social exclusion and a low quality of life. Children with tungiasis have cognitive impairment and lower school exam scores. Impaired physical fitness of adult household members could have a negative impact on household economics. Bacterial superinfection may cause life-threatening complications, such as septicaemia, tetanus or gangrene.

South Sudan like other Countries in the region have not established a formal surveillance system for tungiasis and hence no data available to monitor trends and drive policy actions.

In August 2023, an alert of tunga penetrans infestation was received from Magwi and Ikotos county by FBZ, a national NGO operating in the area. The two counties share borders from Katire in Ikotos and Lobone Payam in Magwi county, and they also share border with Uganda from the South.

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On the 4th – 8th Sept 2023, State Ministry of Health (SMoH), Eastern Equatoria State with support from WHO, implementing partners (IPs) and South Sudan Rehabilitation Commission (SSRRC) led multisectoral taskforce to Lobone Payam and Iswore, Lomarati, Gara villages to investigate the reported alert of jiggers infestation.

The team constructed an operational case definition for tungiasis to conduct the investigation. A case of tungiasis was defined as anybody with visible live fleas appearing with a whitish disc varying in size with a dark point in the upper and lower limbs or any parts of the body. Using the case definition, the multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral team conducted case search in the community and also visited health facilities to take records of case patients.

A total of 78 case patients including 48 males (62%) and 31 females (40%) were recorded. The age group 1-10yrs had the highest recorded infestation with tunga penetrans (41%) followed by age group 50-59yrs (12.8%) with teenagers contributing 3.8%. It should however, be noted that due to the limited investigation period, the number of cases recorded here only represents a small proportion of the community investigated.

In the absence of a formal surveillance system, and lack of expected baseline levels, the evidence generated from the above field investigation warrants the need to address tungiasis as a public health threat in the affected area of Lobone payam and other surrounding areas.

Therefore, in order to mobilize the necessary resources to control and prevent the spread of the disease, the National Ministry of Health hereby declares an outbreak of Tungiasis in Lobone, Eastern Equatoria State and puts in place the following measures.

Public health measures

1. Intensify awareness among affected communities about the early symptoms and signs of tungiasis and promote early health seeking behavior for treatment of the disease using available treatment options.
2. Promote wearing of closed-toe shoes, socks that cover your ankles and long pants when traveling to an area where tungiasis is prevalent.
3. Avoid going barefoot in the areas infested with the tunga penetrans carrying fleas.
4. Practice health and hygiene education among the population in the affected communities.
5. Improve housing conditions by having properly mudded floors to stop breeding of the fleas.

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The Public is further urged to be vigilant and report all suspected Tungiasis cases to the national outbreak hotline **6666** or the nearest health facility, County Health Department, and/or State Ministry of Health.

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Yours sincerely,



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