

UNICEF HUMANITARIAN ACTION REPORT 2009

REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

EIGHT-YEAR-OLD ESPOIR WAS LUCKY TO SURVIVE CHOLERA

The heavy rainfall recorded in 2008 increased the incidence of waterborne diseases and, once again, cholera reappeared in the south-west part of Congo. The epidemic affected the localities of Loutété and Loudima, in Bouenza Department. From February to April 2008, 47 cases of cholera were reported in Loudima and its surroundings.

Eight-year-old Moussitou Espoir, who lives with his father in the village of Kingoma, about 20 kilometres from Loudima, survived the epidemic and tells the story of how he got sick. Everything started with a flow of diarrhoea and stomach pain on the morning of 24 April, followed by more diarrhoea and stomach pain during the rest of the day. "I had a lot of diarrhoea, it was like whitish water; I felt very dizzy and had my head spinning," says Espoir.

Two days earlier, his father Moussitou Pascal had the same symptoms. Espoir found out later, from a nurse at the hospital, that he had been contaminated through permanent contact with his father. They use the same utensils and cups to eat and drink, and even plunge fingers in the same dish to share a meal.

Little Espoir was lucky. His father's neighbour and friend, a tractor driver, agreed to take them to Loudima hospital after long negotiations with the owner of the tractor. They took the road at around 4 a.m. in order to arrive by daylight. "We had to stop three to four times along the way to defecate away in the environment," says the young boy.

They finally reached the Loudima integrated health centre. "I felt very tired and I continued having bubbles in my stomach, but the first words of the nurse (they call her Assistant) reassured me a lot," says Espoir. "She told me that since I managed to get here, I should not worry any longer. I would heal soon, I was safe."

Diagnosed with severe dehydration, Espoir was promptly put on a drip with the assistance of other health workers. The rehydration fluids started flowing drop by drop from a bag hanging over his bed through a small plastic tube with an intravenous drip attached and placed on his arm with a needle, while he tried to drink, as much as he could, a sweet and salty solution and take the pills administered orally.

The following day, the diarrhoea episodes became less frequent and, finally, stopped. Espoir could have a normal meal. "We arrived at the hospital on a Friday, early in the morning, and left it on Tuesday, the following week," he says.

During the treatment at the hospital, Espoir and his father learned a few simple and effective hygiene measures to be strictly observed in order to prevent cholera, such as washing hands with soap before cooking, before eating and after defecation; ensuring that the food is well cooked; treating drinking water with bleach at the rate of two and a half tablespoons per 25-litre jerrycan; and boiling and cooling the water in the same tightly closed container before drinking it.

Today, our little cholera survivor is doing well. Espoir follows the hygiene rules for preventing cholera he learned during his hospitalization. "I returned to school and I managed to share basic rules of hygiene with my school mates and teachers, as well as my neighbours in my block", says Espoir showing determination.