



'I didn't know eating cassava could be so dangerous'

Fatima (25) is a young mother with big worries. Her three children (8, 6 and 1) are seriously undernourished, but she is hardly able to feed them. 'Our tiny plot doesn't yield enough. Moreover, cooking and fetching water is very difficult, because I can hardly walk. Both my legs were suddenly paralysed after having eaten cassava that was insufficiently detoxified. I really don't know what to do.'

'Our family depends on cassava. It's our basic food. We eat it every day. It's a crop that is drought-resistant and grows all year round. I didn't know that eating cassava could have such dangerous consequences though. I now know that from experience. By preparing it the wrong way I have swallowed too much hydrocyanic acid, causing my legs to be permanently crippled. Konzo, that's what this cassava disease is called. Working the land, fetching water and cooking; all these things I can barely manage due to my disabilities. My husband Luciano (35) had left me, because he said I could no longer be a good wife, yet he came back.'

Hunger

'Apart from cassava, we hardly have anything to eat. We only eat a little every day and fight against hunger. It breaks my heart to see my children suffer this much. It's very dangerous for them to be underfed; they are weak and get ill more quickly. I fear that they'll become paraplegics through konzo as well. Fortunately, a local volunteer will teach us various methods to remove the poisonous hydrocyanic acid from the cassava. But I'll also have to make sure my children will get high-protein food; I'm all too aware of that. How to get hold of that though... The other day I boiled an egg and we shared it between the five of us. To us, that is quite something.'

As for myself, I need all the vitamins I can get, as I'm breastfeeding our youngest. I recently started getting multivitamins, which I take diligently. The nutrients in my milk are very important for my baby's growth. Hopefully he will get stronger soon.'