

Childbirth

Healthcare

Prevention

# Pre-eclampsia: Complication stealing many mothers' lives

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Grace Hailat Kaudha, the 30-year-old Iganga District Woman MP, succumbed to pre-eclampsia, a merciless birth complication related to high blood pressure on Friday – but she is not the only one.

Data from the health ministry shows the condition is responsible for close to 22% of all maternal deaths in the country and incidences seem to be on the rise.

"The leading cause of maternal mortality in Uganda is haemorrhage or over-bleeding, but after that are complications related to hypertension and pre-eclampsia," a gynaecologist from the association of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Uganda, Dr Susan Atuhairwe, said.

About 16 women continue to die of pregnancy-related complications in the country every day and ignoring the lead factors, markedly haemorrhage, infection, unsafe abortion and pre-eclampsia cannot be an option, the gynaecologist said.

Mothers with pre-eclampsia present with high blood pressure, which is usually accompanied by fits or seizures. Following the seizures, there is either a period of confusion or coma. This may be before, during or after delivery.

Dr Annette Nakimuli, the head of the obstetrics and gynaecology department at Mulago National Referral Hospital, said 26 of the 136 maternal deaths registered at the facility last year were related to the condition.

She said eight of every 100 admissions at the hospital's obstetrics and gynaecology ward were a result of the disorder, which can also be hereditary.

The hospital had established a four-bed 'pre-eclampsia ward' but patients 'overflowing' into other wards because the numbers surpass the available space, Nakimuli said.

Medics all over the world are still puzzled at what really triggers the complication, but they relate the disorder to genetics and other risk factors.

In a landmark research, scientists in Uganda last year identified a gene (and named it KIR RDS5) which they said can protect expectant mothers from the complication.

Five hundred women who had the fatal complication and another 500 'normal' were studied at Mulago Hospital over a four-year period. Researchers extracted their DNA and it was evident the KIR RDS5 seemed to be protecting those who were 'normal'.

"It was a lot prevalent in the normal 500 and less in women with the condition," Nakimuli said during a stakeholders' engagement in Kampala to mark the first ever World Pre-eclampsia Day in May.

"The findings are really overwhelming because now we can



Mourners at the home of Iganga District Woman MP yesterday. The MP succumbed to pre-eclampsia-related complications on Friday

## SYMPTOMS

- Onset of high blood pressure
- Protein in urine sample
- Abnormal swelling in hands and feet
- Persistent headaches

start to trace the causes of this condition," she said.

"It (pre-eclampsia) is linked to witchcraft or to women who have had extra-marital affairs in many of our cultures. But that is not really true. It is more about genes," Nakimuli said.

"A woman may not experience it with one man, but

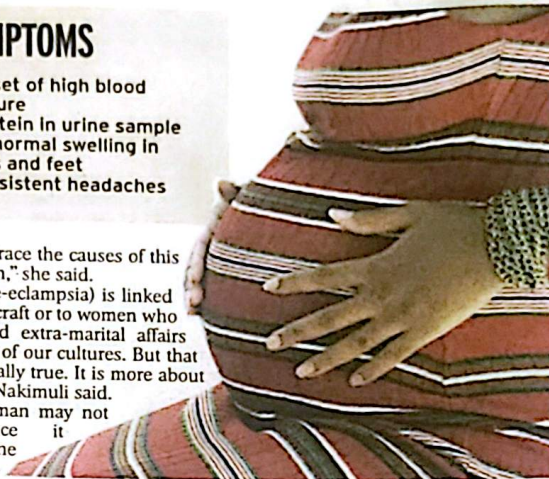
develop it when she changes partners because of genes from the new partner," she said.

The death of the Iganga District Woman MP took the number of lawmakers in the 10th Parliament who have passed away in less than a year to three.

Kaudha, a first-time lawmaker, was elected to the seat on the ticket of the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) ticket after defeating the then incumbent Olivia Kwagala, who contested as an independent.

Contrary to initial reports on social media that the legislator had died while giving birth, the chairperson of the NRM parliamentary caucus, Solomon Silwany, said Kaudha succumbed to pre-eclampsia. She was five months pregnant.

Silwany said the lawmaker was



rushed to Case Clinic.

But even at Case it was quite apparent that the parliamentarian's condition required more specialised care, which could not be given at the facility. It was then that the family rushed her to Mulago Hospital (Kawempe extension), where she passed on less than 30 minutes on arrival, according to Silwany.

## Effect on baby

High blood pressure during pregnancy can also have an effect on the baby's growth rate. This can result in low birth weight. According to the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, other complications include placental abruption (a medical emergency during which the placenta detaches itself from the uterus prematurely) and preterm delivery (delivery before 38 weeks of pregnancy).

## Caesarean sections

Although the exact cause of pre-eclampsia is not known, statistics from the World Health Organisation show that for women who have had the condition, about 20 to 40% of their daughters and 11 to 37% of their sisters will also develop it.

The WHO estimates the incidence of pre-eclampsia to be seven times higher in developing countries (2.8% of live births) than in developed countries (0.4%).

Unhealthy lifestyle choices may lead to high blood pressure during pregnancy. Being overweight or obese or failing to stay active are major risk factors for high blood pressure.

Women who are experiencing first pregnancy are also more likely to have high blood pressure.

## RISK FACTORS

- Having a family history of the condition
- Being over 40 years old
- Having been at least 10 years since your last pregnancy
- Expecting multiple babies (twins or triplets)
- Having a body mass index (BMI) of 35 or more