

Crisis-hit Venezuelans turn to homemade remedies to fight virus

March 22 2020

Faced with the coronavirus pandemic on top of an economic crisis that has left shortages of medicines and medical supplies, Venezuelans are turning to homemade remedies to protect themselves.

Whether it's hot drinks infused with lemon, salt, garlic or onions, cash-strapped Venezuelans are cooking up concoctions handed down from one generation to another.

No sooner had Venezuela announced its first [coronavirus](#) cases than Dilia Zorrilla ran to the shops to buy [face masks](#), anti-bacterial gel, alcohol and chlorine, but also onions for the hostel she runs in Guiria, a remote village in the northwest, 600 kilometers (370 miles) east of the capital Caracas.

She asked her employees to place the onions in a glass bowl at the feet of a statue of the Virgin Mary, who is particularly venerated on the Caribbean coast.

"And that is not too many," she said. Local legend has it that onions can ward off illnesses.

When new guests arrive at the hostel, which smells of onions, Zorrilla puts a drop of antiseptic gel in their hands and advises them to go out and buy gloves and face masks.

She also serves them a citric herbal tea. "You must drink it," she orders.

In this remote area, Zorrilla feels cut off from information. Television and telephone signals are unreliable.

"Here, everything we know has come from social media," the 42-year-old told AFP.

'Part of the desperation'

In this region infested with drug-traffickers and [armed groups](#), these elixirs form part of the secrets handed down from one generation to the next.

For surgeon Jaime Lorenzo from the United Doctors NGO "these measures are part of the desperation" caused by a pandemic that has already killed 13,000 people worldwide, but which has affected just 42 people so far in Venezuela.

"As scientists, all remedies need to be based on scientific evidence," Lorenzo told AFP.

While these concoctions may have been passed down through generations, none of them has been scientifically tested, Lorenzo said.

The best advice, as espoused by President Nicolas Maduro, is to stay at home.

Since the beginning of the week, Venezuela has been under a near-total lockdown.

People are only allowed out to buy food or medicines. Schools are closed and most air transport links suspended.

Police and soldiers patrol the roads to ensure the decree is respected.

But long before COVID-19 arrived in Venezuela, the health system had already collapsed and it was often hard to get hold of medicines, either due to their exorbitant cost or scarcity in pharmacies.

'We're not prepared'

People have turned to homemade remedies even to treat cancer.

So "we're just not prepared" to face a pandemic, said 53-year-old trader Alodia Anton, who turned up at the Guiria hospital to have her blood pressure taken.

But it wasn't possible "because they don't have a [blood pressure](#) meter on the emergency ward."

Her biggest fear is that she or someone close to her would need emergency medical care: the main hospital in the region is in Cumana, a six-hour drive away on poorly surfaced roads.

So Anton makes do with "advice" her sister sends her by WhatsApp from the United States, such as "drink hot tea" with lemon, camomile or "whatever," wash the floor with vinegar and keep onions in her room.

Lorenzo warns against believing "myths" that hot drinks can weaken COVID-19, but that message isn't getting through.

"We're drinking boiled water with garlic and lemon," says a tearful Rosa Solangel through a face mask.

The 56-year-old cook fears for the health of her three children who have left the country for Brazil, Peru and Colombia—4.9 million people have fled Venezuela's economic meltdown since the end of 2015 according to UN data.

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Citation: Crisis-hit Venezuelans turn to homemade remedies to fight virus (2020, March 22)
retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-03-crisis-hit-venezuelans-homemade-remedies-virus.html>

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