

260+ killed by lightning each year (South Africa)

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Johannesburg - More than 260 people are killed by lightning in South Africa each year, the SA Weather Service said on Wednesday.

Forecaster Puseletso Mofokeng said these figures were annual averages based on Statistics SA data between 1999 and 2007, when 2 375 lightning related deaths were reported.

He was speaking after two groups of Johannesburg school pupils were struck by lightning this week.

Four 16-year-old Protea Glen Secondary schoolgirls were struck while walking home from school on Monday. One was critically injured.

Nine boys from King Edward VII School, aged between 16 and 18, were pulling the covers over a cricket pitch when a bolt of lightning struck the field on Tuesday afternoon. Two were critically injured.

'There doesn't have to be a severe storm'

Mofokeng said it was likely that some deaths went unreported.

"The year with the lowest recorded death rate was 2000, when only about 205 [deaths] were reported."

Most of the lightning fatalities happened in the Eastern Cape, closely followed by KwaZulu- Natal.

Provinces with the second-highest risk were the Free State, Gauteng, and North West.

Mpumalanga and Limpopo had marginally lower lightning risks, while the Northern and Western Cape had low incidences of lightning.

Mofokeng said: "Lightning itself is very dangerous, all the time. There doesn't have to be a severe storm."

If thunder could be heard, even in the distance, it was wise to take precautions, because lightning could strike from a distance.

Mofokeng said there was a common misconception that lightning mainly struck during heavy rain.

"There doesn't have to be rainfall for lightning to strike, and when a storm is past it can still be dangerous."

'A complex phenomenon'

CBI-electric Professor of Lightning Ian Jandrell, of the Wits High Voltage Laboratory, agreed: "Lightning generally precedes rainfall or comes after the rain."

He said it was "good advice" not to take a bath or shower during storms, but this depended on how well the home was earthed.

Jandrell said he had not visited the areas where the lightning strikes occurred, but was speaking from insights based on the understanding of how lightning works.

"Lightning is a very complex phenomenon."

He said more than 90% of lightning was the negative downward type, which would strike the highest object, but not necessarily at the top.

Less than 5% was positive downward lightning, which could travel down past a skyscraper building to strike the street below.

It was also very unlikely that one would be hit by a direct lightning strike.

"For example, if lightning strikes a tree in a parking area, [someone standing nearby] could be harmed."

'Avoid flat open areas'

In wet conditions, this "step potential", or the reach of this current, was larger, but Jandrell said the distance was difficult to quantify.

Mofokeng said standing in flat open areas during storms carried risks.

"Lightning will usually go to the highest point. When you are in an open space, you [will be] the first one to be hit, because you will be the highest point."

It was also unwise to run around during a storm.

Golfers should also be aware that the metal in their golf clubs could act as lightning rods.

He advised the public not to swim or take shelter under trees during storms. Mofokeng said certain kinds of trees were more likely to attract lightning than others.

Jandrell said there were many common myths about lightning in South Africa and the rest of the world.

For example, covering mirrors during storms to reduce the likelihood of strikes had no scientific basis.

Several deaths

Similarly, placing car tyres on the roof of one's home would not repel lightning.

At least seven people have been killed by lightning since the beginning of the year.

In the Eastern Cape on Monday, a 17-year-old boy was killed and a 16-year-old girl critically injured when lightning struck them at Msintsane, near Mthatha.

In KwaZulu-Natal, three teenagers were killed while walking home from a tuckshop in KwaChezu, Nkandla, on January 9.

At the time, provincial co-operative governance MEC Nomusa Dube said: "These incidents are getting more severe, and their frequency suggests that extreme and abnormal weather conditions caused by climate change have a lot to do with these tragedies."

- SAPA