

Medical Officer of Health Environmental Health ADVICE

Inside

Avoiding spider bites

Childhood poisonings

Preventing the establishment of exotic mosquitoes in Auckland

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Introduction

This issue of EH Advice focuses on safety at home. We provide information on safer gardening to avoid infection with *Legionellosis*. We discuss ways to avoid spider bites. Childhood poisonings are a common yet preventable cause of hospital admissions and we outline safety precautions you can take at home to prevent children from being poisoned.

Legionellosis and Gardening Products

The ARPHS has recently investigated several cases of Legionellosis (Legionnaires Disease) in home gardeners. Legionellosis is caused by exposure to *Legionella* bacteria. Legionellosis is a form of pneumonia ranging from a mild to a severely life threatening illness with an incubation period of 2-10 days. People can become infected by inhaling aerosols from soil and water containing *Legionella* organisms. Legionellosis is more common in older people, particularly if they have a chronic illness, reduced immunity or if they smoke.

The *Legionella* organism can be found in soils and soil products including compost and in water. Potential exposure routes include soil and soil products, stagnant water, unused shower roses in bathrooms and domestic hot water supplies. People can also be exposed to *Legionella* in air conditioning systems in commercial buildings, in shopping malls and in supermarkets where fruit and vegetables are sprayed by 'mistlers'.

See your doctor if you develop a flu-like illness (symptoms include a fever, dry cough, sore chest and aching muscles) a few days after handling compost or potting mix. Antibiotics can be effective against legionellosis if treatment is early.

The risk of exposure to *Legionella* can be reduced by:

- ▶ Opening bags of soil products slowly, away from your face.
- ▶ Water plants (garden and indoors) with a gentle spray.
- ▶ Minimising the amount of dust when working in the garden (gently water first)
- ▶ Dampening potting mixes before use.
- ▶ Making sure any working area (e.g. glasshouse or potting shed) is well ventilated.
- ▶ Wearing a paper mask to reduce the risk of inhaling dust and vapours while gardening. (this is recommended for people over the age of 40 who may have reduced immunity).



▶ Further information is available from the Ministry of Health brochure *Safe and Healthier Gardening*. Copies are available from the HealthEd website www.healthed.govt.nz or the Duty Environmental Health Protection Officer telephone 09 262 1855.

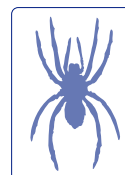
How to avoid spider bites

Most of the spiders found in New Zealand are harmless to people. However the Katipo, the Redback and the White-tailed spider should be avoided. Katipo spiders are found on sandy beaches and in sand dunes. Redback spiders are recent arrivals from Australia and their webs can be found underneath plants and ledges. White-tailed spiders do not build webs and tend to live in vegetation and around houses.

The Katipo and Redback spiders are venomous spiders, however bites from these species are rare and a safe and effective antivenom for Katipo and Redback spider bites is available.

Symptoms of katipo bites include pain at the bite site, which may spread to other areas of the body and become more intense over the next few hours. Other symptoms include difficulty in breathing and abdominal (stomach) cramps.

A bite from a redback spider feels similar to a pinprick and may lead to localised redness, pain and sweating. The pain and sweating may spread and some people may experience stomach pain. Other symptoms include aches in muscles and joints, nausea and vomiting, and increased heart rate and blood pressure.



If you suspect that you have been bitten by a katipo or redback spider seek medical attention immediately. Do not apply pressure to the wound or drink alcohol.

White tailed spider bites are not considered to be poisonous to people. Their bite can be painful, but there are no long lasting effects. Symptoms include a burning feeling, swelling, redness and itchiness at the bite site.

If you think you have been bitten by a white tailed spider, clean the wound with warm soapy water or antiseptic and place ice on the bite (not directly on the skin) to reduce any pain or swelling. If the bite area becomes very red, painful, blisters, forms an ulcer or becomes infected seek medical attention.

Ways to avoid being bitten by spiders include:

At the beach (katipo spiders)

- ▶ Do not drape clothing or towels over driftwood
- ▶ Wear shoes on the beach and sand dunes
- ▶ Be careful when moving driftwood and plants on the beach

At home and in the garden (if redback spiders have been reported in your area)

- ▶ Check clothes and shoes and wear gloves if working in the garden
- ▶ Check behind furniture when cleaning or moving furniture around inside the house
- ▶ Keep areas where children play free of places for spiders to hide

- ▶ Fill sandpits to the rim
- ▶ Keep plants free of spider webs
- ▶ Clean outdoor play equipment

Spiders found in recently imported goods should be reported to the (Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF) telephone 0800 809 966.

▶ Further information on spider bites is available from:

- ▶ National Poisons Centre 0800 POISON (0800 764 766)
- ▶ Toxinz Public Website www.toxinz.com

This information has been sourced from a Ministry of Health brochure *Spiders in New Zealand*. Copies of this brochure are available from the HealthEd website www.healthed.govt.nz. or by telephoning the Owens Rd resource centre 09 262 1855.

Childhood Poisonings

Childhood poisonings are a common cause of hospital admissions. However simple preventative measures at home and in the workplace can help to reduce the number of cases of childhood poisoning. Poisonings at home are often caused by young children playing with:

- ▶ medicines including both prescription and over the counter
- ▶ household cleaners e.g. disinfectants, bleach, dishwasher detergents
- ▶ garden chemicals e.g. pesticides and baits
- ▶ home improvement products e.g. paint, polish
- ▶ cosmetics, hair colouring agents, essential oils

Ways to reduce the risk of young children being poisoned:

- ▶ Limit the quantities of poisons in and around your home and garden shed.
- ▶ Ask for child safety caps on your medicines and use all child-resistant packaging as instructed.

- ▶ Check that you can open and close child safety caps before you leave the pharmacy.
- ▶ Always read the labels of medicines and poisons, so that you know how to use and store them safely.
- ▶ Lock away all medicines and poisons in high cupboards with safety catches.
- ▶ Keep an eye on what young children are doing.
- ▶ Throw out old and out of date medicines.



- ▶ If you suspect that someone has been poisoned contact the National Poisons Centre 0800 POISON (0800 764 766) or a doctor. Get expert advice before you do anything else.

Early Childhood Education Centre Project

Early Childhood Education Centres include a diverse range of services; Kindergartens, Playcentres, Pasifika Centres, Education Care and Service and Te Kohanga Reo. There are about 1100 early childhood education centres in the Auckland region which are licensed by the Ministry of Education. ARPHS oversees the health and safety aspects of the licensing process.

The Ministry of Health recommends that each Early Childhood Education Centre (ECEC) should be assessed by Public Health Service for surveillance purposes every two years. For several years Auckland Regional Public Health has not been funded to reassess ECECs unless there is a complaint or an outbreak of illness needing investigation, or unless the Ministry of Education make a specific request. Recently funding has been provided for a pilot project to assess a small sample of selected centres within the Auckland region. Seventeen ECECs from each of five groups have been

chosen at random from Ministry of Education databases. The purpose of this survey is to take a "snapshot assessment" of public health aspects of ECECs in the Auckland region, and to determine whether there is a strong case for funding of surveillance by the Auckland Regional Public Health Service. The survey will involve looking at the centres' policies, inspecting the premises, asking the licensee (or their designated representative) and the staff some questions and observing some of the activities of the centre.

The outcomes of the survey will include a confidential report to each participating centre, as well as a copy of the final report. This report will be anonymous and combine the results of all the facilities examined.

- ▶ For further information please contact Susan Berg telephone 09 262 1855.

Preventing the establishment of exotic mosquitoes in the Auckland Region

The Auckland Regional Public Health Service is funded by the Ministry of Health to provide services in the areas of biosecurity and quarantine through-out the Auckland region. One of our main objectives is to prevent the establishment of exotic mosquitoes in the Auckland Region. The Environmental Health team undertakes surveillance for mosquitoes, investigates mosquito interceptions and incursions and provides educational programmes for port and airport staff.

The Ports of Auckland has been identified as one of the highest risk areas for the introduction of exotic mosquitoes capable of transmitting disease. Mosquitoes are occasionally found in cargo or on ships from overseas and can spread serious human disease like Yellow Fever, Japanese B Encephalitis and Dengue fever. These diseases are not currently spread in New Zealand. During 2003, there were 9 interceptions of mosquitoes at the Ports of Auckland. Interceptions can vary from a finding of one dead adult mosquito in a shipping container to that of 50 live mosquito larvae in a bucket of water.

The Environmental Health team is currently running an education campaign in the downtown Auckland area to help prevent the establishment of exotic mosquitoes in Auckland. As part of this project, posters were delivered to offices and homes in close proximity to the Ports of Auckland. The key message of this education campaign is to eliminate standing water, which can become a breeding habitat for mosquitoes.

- ▶ For further information about mosquitoes in the downtown Auckland area please contact:
Auckland City Council 09 379 2020
Auckland Regional Public Health Service 09 262 1855

How to prevent the establishment of exotic mosquitoes:

Mosquitoes need water to breed. Simple ways to stop breeding include:

- ▶ Get rid of objects outside that hold water, including jars, bottles and plastic containers.
- ▶ Fill pot plant saucers with sand. Some pot plants hold water in their leaves - empty weekly.
- ▶ Regularly empty and refill drinking bowls for pets.
- ▶ Check that mosquitoes aren't breeding in ornamental ponds.
- ▶ Check that gutters and drains are not blocked by leaves or rubbish.
- ▶ Fill or drain hollows that can hold water.
- ▶ Consider hidden places like the roofs and facades of historic buildings.
- ▶ Think about where the condensation goes from air-conditioners.

Short Notes

▶ The Smoke-free Environment Amendment Act 2003

The Smoke-free Environment Amendment Act 2003 was passed in December 2003. It has implications for all work places and some sections take effect immediately. From January 2004, schools, early childhood education centres and other places of learning will become 100% smoke-free (including grounds and sports fields, 24 hours per day, 7 days a week). From December 2004, all indoor workplaces and hospitality will be 100% smoke-free. There will be no exceptions for separate smoking areas or ventilated smoking rooms in workplaces or hospitality venues for workers or patrons. The only exception for a separately ventilated smoking room will be for live-in patients or resident (not workers or visitors) in certain care facilities.

A printed copy of the Act will be available from Bennetts bookshop. An online version is expected to be available from www.legislation.govt.nz in January 2004.

Further information on the Smoke-free Environment Amendment Act 2003 including a list of frequently asked questions is available from the Ministry of Health national drug policy website www.ndp.govt.nz/smokefree.html.

Susan Berg



Susan Berg joined the Environmental Health team in September 2003 as the Early Childhood Education Centre Project Co-ordinator. After an early career in nursing, she returned to the University of Oregon to finish an undergraduate degree. Susan has a Master of Public Health from San Jose State University, California. While attending graduate school Susan completed an internship with the American Lung Association as a facilitator of their Quit Smoking Programme. After an earlier stint in New Zealand working at Middlemore Hospital and a clinical analyst position in Washington State, Susan returned to New Zealand to work as the first Regional Influenza Co-ordinator for the Immunisation Advisory Centre.