

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

Tuesday, 24 March 2009

### **Public health advisory:**

#### **Dog's death prompts warnings about New Zealand's poisonous plants**

Auckland Regional Public Health Service is advising people to be careful around poisonous plants after a dog died from eating karaka berries in an Auckland park. Karaka berries are attractive to both children and dogs. The berries fall from the trees in summer, are two and a half to four centimetres long, oval in shape and turn from green to orange.

Dr. Simon Baker, Medical Officer of Health at ARPHS advises parents and those caring for children to, "Be aware of which of plants in New Zealand are poisonous, and know the plants and trees in your house and garden. "

"We also need to teach our children not to eat or gather any berries or plant matter unless guided by an adult who knows that the plant is safe for human consumption."

While very few people die from contact with plants in New Zealand, many have been made sick, and many animals die each year from plant poisoning.

The National Poisons Centre in Dunedin (<http://poisons.co.nz/>) receives many calls each year from doctors and members of the public after children and animals have eaten berries, flowers, leaves, and fungi.

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**Top safety tips for minimising harm from poisonous plants:**

- Be aware of which of plants in New Zealand are poisonous, and know the plants and trees in your house and garden. Remove poisonous plants or move them to a part of the garden or house that children can't reach.
- Teach children not to eat or gather any berries or plant matter unless guided by an adult who knows that the plant is safe for human consumption.
- Check the label when you buy a plant, or ask staff at the Garden Centre to check if the plant is poisonous.
- Clear away berries, flowers and leaves from poisonous plants that fall onto lawns and paths.
- Don't eat fungi unless you are an expert. Fungi can be very hard to identify. If you have young children, check your lawn and garden regularly, and remove all fungi safely.
- Pre-schools or primary schools need to know which plants to avoid on their grounds, and be able to identify them.

There are over a hundred poisonous plants in New Zealand, and many people don't know which plants are poisonous. Most are introduced species, and many are only present in gardens.

**ENDS**

For further information contact: Auckland Regional Public Health Service (ARPHS)

Dr Simon Baker, medical officer of health      Sally Young, communications manager  
(09) 623 4600 x 27164                                      (09) 623 4600 x 27135 | 021 938 431

**Editors note:**

According to Dr. Henry Connor, a leading authority on poisonous plants, the most important poisonous plants in New Zealand include; the berries of black nightshade, tutu and karaka; the leaves of oleander, hemlock and foxglove; and the beans of laburnum and castor oil plant. The mushroom, deathcap, may be found in Auckland during March, April and May; it is the most poisonous mushroom in New Zealand. Tree nettle, a native shrub found at the margins of forest and scrub, has many stinging hairs up to 5 mm long on the leaves and stalks - stinging may be severe enough to even cause death.

Visit the National Poisons Centre website to get the information you need.

Information on poisonous plants for pre-schools can be found at:

<http://poisons.co.nz/files.php?f=10>

Further information on poisonous plants in New Zealand, and details on how to purchase a full colour poster identifying the poisonous plants, can be found at: <http://poisons.co.nz/files.php?f=11>.

Details on a recently published book, that provides more information on poisonous plants in New Zealand, can be found at: <http://poisons.co.nz/index.php>

## **Questions and Answers**

### **What did we do?**

We were notified of the death of a dog after eating karaka berries in an Auckland park in February. This prompted us to consider if we should be doing more to inform the public about poisonous plants in New Zealand – particularly to protect children - and how best to do this.

### **What did we find?**

We believe that very few people know which plants in New Zealand are poisonous – even keen gardeners. In fact, there are over a hundred poisonous plants in New Zealand. While very few people have died from contact with plants in New Zealand, many have been made sick, and many animals have died from unintentional poisoning.

### **How many children get poisoned by plants each year?**

The National Poisons Centre gets about 1700 calls each year about plant poisonings. In 2008, 1300 calls concerned human poisonings - 900 of which were about children aged 0 to 6, and 400 about children over 6, and adults. 10% of all National Poisons Centre calls are for plant poisonings, and 60% of these calls concern children.

### **Has anyone ever died of plant poisoning?**

Deaths from plants are very rare, although there have been cases recorded – for example a young man who died after brushing past Onga Onga tree nettle in 1961, and a group of French sailors who are reported to have died after eating tutu in the 1830s. A lot more people have been made sick – ranging from gastro-like symptoms lasting a few hours, to nasty skin rashes lasting several days. Around 75 people a year need hospital treatment following plant poisonings

### **Which are the most important poisonous plants in New Zealand?**

According to Dr. Henry Connor, a leading authority on poisonous plants, the most important poisonous plants in New Zealand are:

- the berries of black nightshade, tutu and karaka
- the leaves of oleander, hemlock and foxglove
- the seeds of laburnum and castor oil plant
- the mushroom, deathcap, which may be found in Auckland during March, April and May; it is the most poisonous mushroom in New Zealand.

- New Zealand tree nettle (Onga Onga), a native shrub found at the margins of forest and scrub, which has many stinging hairs up to 5 mm long on the leaves and stalks; stinging may be severe enough to even cause death.

**Which are the plants that the National Poisons Centre gets most calls about (and what is the poison)?**

Arum lily and Italian arum (Oxalate crystals)

Black nightshade and bittersweet (Solanum alkaloid)

Stinking iris / *Iris foetidissima* (Cardiac glycoside)

*Oleander* (Cardiac glycoside)

Milkweeds / *Euphorbia* (Irritant sap)

*Kowhai* (Nicotinic alkaloid)

Daffodil

Hemlock (Nicotinic alkaloid)

**What sort of problems do these plants cause?**

Symptoms vary from;

- Burning in the mouth, throat and oesophagus
- Nasty skin rashes
- Gastro – like illnesses
- Effects on the heart
- Effects on the brain
- Effects on the liver

**What should be done to prevent children getting poisoned?**

Parents need to be aware of which plants in New Zealand are poisonous. Visit the National Poisons Centre website to get the information you need.

Know the plants and trees in your house and garden. If you have small children, consider removing the poisonous plants, or moving them to a part of the house or garden the little ones can't get to.

When you buy a plant, check on the label – or ask staff at the Garden Centre – to see if any part of the plant is poisonous. This is especially important if you have small children, or frequent visitors who have small children.

Children should be discouraged from gathering and eating any new plant material unless guided by an adult who knows that the plant is safe for human consumption.

Children need to be taught never to consume berries, unless this is checked first by a responsible adult.

Clear away berries, flowers and leaves from poisonous plants that fall onto lawns and paths.

Fungi, (mushrooms) although they are not plants, can also be poisonous, and very hard to identify. Don't eat fungi you collect unless you are an expert. If you have small children, check your garden regularly, and remove all fungi safely.

Pre-schools and primary schools need to know which plants to avoid on their grounds, and be able to identify them.

### **What should a parent or caregiver do if they think their child has eaten part of a plant or fungus?**

Stay calm – most poisons do not act immediately – and a calm environment will help soothe the child.

Don't make the child vomit, and don't give them large volumes of liquids.

For skin or eye contact – wash the area with a lot of water.

Check for signs and symptoms. If the child is sick, the parents should visit a health professional as soon as possible – a GP, an Accident & Medical clinic, or preferably the Emergency Department of a hospital. Take a piece of the plant with you, to help with identification.

If the child is becoming drowsy, or seems really unwell, call an ambulance.

If the child seems well – monitor the child for signs and symptoms of poisoning, and try and identify the plant. You could try a neighbour who is a keen gardener, look in gardening or plant books, use the internet, take a piece to a Garden Centre, or phone the National Poisons Centre on 0800 POISON.

### **Do early childhood education centres (ECECs) and schools know about poisonous plants?**

The Ministry of Education requires ECECs and schools to have hazard ID policies, and that should include identifying poisonous plants and fungi. If they don't feel confident in excluding poisonous plants from their premises, then they could get hold of resources to help them do so. For example:

Information on poisonous plants for pre-schools can be found on the National Poisons Centre website, at: <http://poisons.co.nz/files.php?f=10>

### **Are there any sources that parents and caregivers can use to try and identify poisonous plants in the garden?**

Information on poisonous plants in New Zealand, and details on how to purchase a full colour poster identifying the poisonous plants, can be found on the National Poisons Centre website, at: <http://poisons.co.nz/files.php?f=11>.

A recently published book – Plants that Poison; A New Zealand guide - provides more information on poisonous plants, and can be found in bookstores. Details are on the National Poisons Centre website, at: <http://poisons.co.nz/index.php>

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