

Medical Officer of Health Environmental Health ADVICE

Inside

▶ Early Childhood Education Centres

▶ Safefall surfaces in playgrounds

▶ Civil defence emergencies

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Introduction

During the Winter months it is important to keep houses warm and dry. In this edition we discuss how to safely heat houses. Auckland Regional Public Health Service works with early childhood education centres to help prevent injuries and outbreaks of illness. This edition contains information for early childhood education centres on the use of disposable gloves during nappy changes and the regulations related to safefall surfaces in playgrounds as well as recommendations for an exclusion due to illness policy.

Changes to the Environmental Health Team

Dr Virginia Hope, previously programme manager of the EHT, has now taken up a new role as Environmental Health Strategist. This will include developing environmental health strategy for the unit beginning with a thinkpiece later this year. Dr Hope will be responsible for coordinating strategic work in these areas across ARPHS and will continue to link the environmental health service to key regional strategic forums. She will also be facilitating the development of relationships with a number of external agencies. Please contact her if you have suggestions or comments or would like to keep informed by writing to virginia@adhb.govt.nz.

Pending a permanent appointment, environmental health team operations are being managed by Dr William Rainger. Dr Rainger is a public health physician with a background in general management and health services funding and planning.

Healthy home heating

It is important during the colder months to have a warm, dry home. Many New Zealand houses do not meet international recommendations for healthy indoor temperatures. Having a warm dry house will make people less likely to get sick over winter and help to stop mould growing. All houses should have adequate floor and ceiling insulation. The following advice for safe and healthy home heating has been compiled with the assistance of the New Zealand Fire Service.

General safety tips

- ▶ Install a smoke alarm and check the batteries regularly.
- ▶ **Do not** dry clothes on heaters.
- ▶ Make sure that there is at least one metre between heaters and fires and any furniture or bedding.
- ▶ Children should not be able to touch or knock over free standing heaters.
- ▶ Children should not be able to put objects into or on top of heaters and fires.
- ▶ **Do not** use cooking stoves and ovens to heat houses.
- ▶ **Do not** leave young children and pets alone with heaters or fires.

Heaters and radiators

- ▶ Wiring on heaters should be repaired and checked by an electrician.
- ▶ **Do not** turn heaters on their side.

- ▶ **Do not** use heaters if the guard is missing or the elements are damaged.

Gas heaters

Gas heaters and/or stoves which do not have a chimney, flue or exhaust duct to outside should not be used without adequate ventilation (open window or domestic ventilation system). These heaters produce gases (oxides of nitrogen and carbon monoxide) when they burn which can badly affect people with asthma, other respiratory illnesses or heart disease. They also produce lots of moisture and can make houses very damp and mouldy.

Do not leave freestanding gas heaters on overnight or if you go out.

- ▶ Regularly check the heater for damage to seals and connections. Damaged seals are the most common cause of heater fires.
- ▶ Make sure that your cylinder is within the Test Date – legally it cannot be filled if it is out of test.

Open fires/log burners/wood stoves

- ▶ Chimneys should be cleaned and inspected regularly.
- ▶ Use fireguards.
- ▶ Firewood and/or fuel should be dry.
- ▶ **Do not** burn treated or painted wood as toxic fumes (e.g. lead, arsenic and volatile organic compounds) can be released.



Do not burn glossy advertising materials, plastic or rubbish in fires as these may also produce toxic fumes when burnt.

Ash and coals from fireplaces can take a long time to cool

down, when cleaning out the fireplace any ash should be put into a metal container and taken outside and allowed to cool down. Ash added to rubbish bins has caused house fires.

▶ More information on safe home heating is available from: www.acc.org.nz/injuryprevention, and www.fire.org.nz

Exclusion due to Illness Policy for Early Childhood Education Centres

Early childhood education centres (ECECs) are required to exclude children who are unwell. ARPHS recommends that each centre has a policy for exclusion due to illness. These policies are important because they help to minimise or prevent outbreaks of illness within an ECEC. ARPHS recommends that the following information is included when preparing the exclusion due to illness policy.

▶ Parents are expected to collect their child without delay if he/she is ill.

▶ Children (and staff) with diarrhoea, vomiting, fever and/or undiagnosed skin rash should never remain at the childcare centre (except for the time it takes parents to collect the child from the centre).

Diarrhoea or loose stools present a particular risk, as even if the cause is not an infectious disease, it makes it difficult to maintain normal hygiene. Even micro-organisms (germs) normally present in the gut can cause health problems if consumed (e.g. passed into the mouth by contaminated hands or objects).

▶ While a sick child is waiting for parents to collect them from the centre, they will be made comfortable and kept isolated from other children and staff, and a staff member will remain with them at all times.

▶ To minimise risk, this staff member must not be involved with food preparation.

▶ In general, if children experience vomiting and/or diarrhoea they should not attend the centre until 24 hours after all symptoms have stopped.

▶ Children and staff who are unwell should otherwise be excluded as advised by the doctor or Auckland Regional

Public Health Service recommendations (Nga Kupu Oranga, Ministry of Health, available at www.moh.govt.nz; Infectious Diseases Children Can Get brochure/poster, available from Auckland Regional Public Health Service).

If in doubt, contact the Auckland Regional Public Health Service, ph (09) 262 1855 (24hrs/7days).

Isolation Area

▶ A well-ventilated, warm, quiet area where sick babies and children can be looked after away from other children.

▶ Separated from all food preparation and sleeping areas.

▶ Sleeping facilities appropriate to the ages of children enrolled need to be available (including a cot/bed/stretcher/nursing chair fitted with a waterproof cover, and clean bedding and linen).

Regular Reminders to Parents

We suggest that the following messages be included in enrolment information and brought to parents' attention regularly through newsletters, noticeboards etc:

▶ Parents are expected to collect their child without delay if he/she becomes ill.

▶ The centre is required by law to exclude your child until well.

▶ In general, if children experience vomiting and/or diarrhoea they should not attend the centre until 24 hours after all symptoms have stopped.

▶ Children should otherwise be excluded as per advice from your doctor, or as the centre has been advised by Auckland Regional Public Health Service.

Disposable gloves and nappy changes in early childhood education centres

Disposable gloves are worn by caregivers in early childhood education centres to help prevent the transmission of infectious diseases during nappy changes. However gloves must be used appropriately to be effective. Caregivers need to remember the following points:

▶ Gloves are single use only – that is they must be changed and disposed of between each child.

▶ Gloves can carry and transfer germs as well as hands. Gloves in themselves provide no greater protection against cross-contamination than bare hands.

▶ The wearing of gloves is not a substitute for hand hygiene and hands must be washed in between nappy changes.

We recommend that the licensee or manager of the facility hold regular staff training/education sessions to reinforce the proper procedures for safe and hygienic practices around nappy changes. Staff should be reminded that gloves become contaminated during a nappy change and can then cause cross-contamination if not removed and disposed of

immediately after a single use. After the gloves have been removed, hands must be washed. This practice should then be monitored regularly by management.

Other important things to remember about nappy changing in ECECs include:

▶ A nappy changing/hygiene procedure needs to be clearly displayed above the table (listing steps that need to be taken to ensure good hygiene is maintained during and after changing nappies).

▶ The disinfectant available at the nappy changing table should be 0.5% sodium hypochlorite, made fresh each day.

▶ While there is a child on the nappy changing table, staff need to be able to keep one hand on the child at all times (i.e. be within arm's length).

Nappy changing is a high-risk activity. Handwashing and hand-drying, and cleaning and disinfecting the area between nappy changes, are essential to stop the spread of disease.

Safefall Surfaces in Playgrounds

The Education (Early Childhood Centres) Regulations (1998) require safefall surfaces for equipment over 500 mm (Regs 17 & 24). Bark can be used as safefall surface in early childhood education centres (ECECs). The ECD Guidelines (<http://www.ecd.govt.nz/running/playgrounds.html>) provide guidance on the use of bark as a Safefall surface in an early childhood education centres. The bark needs to be regularly checked for hazards and redistributed before use, to ensure it is always at least 200mm deep.

Other safefall surfaces need to be installed and maintained in accordance with the relevant New Zealand Standards (www.standards.co.nz). We expect ECECs to provide documentation to this effect from the manufacturer/installer.

Note that bark breaks down over several months and will need replacing or topping up. Grass (particularly kiakia grass) or other accumulation under safefall surfaces may significantly degrade the ability of the surface to absorb impact. A neglected safefall surface that is no longer effective can result in serious injury.

Protecting your Health during a Civil Defence Emergency

Recent weather events have caused civil defence emergencies in several parts of New Zealand. Protecting you and your family's health is important during a civil defence emergency. You can reduce the chances of you or your family becoming ill during an emergency by:

- ▶ Maintaining a basic first aid kit with antiseptics and pain relief. You can either make your own kit or purchase them from pharmacies and supermarkets.
- ▶ Making sure you and members of your family have the medicines they need for specific health complaints.
- ▶ Keeping immunisations up to date.
- ▶ Being prepared to look after your family for several days during an emergency. Each household should have an emergency survival kit.

Emergency Survival Kit

Each household should have the following items handy in case of an emergency.

Health and safety

- ▶ First aid kit
- ▶ Essential medicines
- ▶ Insect repellent
- ▶ Fire extinguisher

Food and water

- ▶ Food-canned and dried
- ▶ Food that requires no cooking e.g. dried fruit, nuts, cereals
- ▶ Means of cooking, e.g. primus, barbecue
- ▶ Water - bottled and/or frozen
- ▶ Can opener and knife
- ▶ Household bleach and disinfectant
- ▶ Pet food supplies

Clothes, bedding and hygiene

- ▶ Clothing-warm, windproof and rainproof
- ▶ Strong shoes, rubber gloves
- ▶ Blankets or sleeping bags
- ▶ Plastic bags, garden lime, toilet paper, soap

Means of communication

- ▶ Waterproof torches and spare batteries
- ▶ Radio and spare batteries
- ▶ Pencil and paper

▶ Further information is available from the Ministry of Health document *Protecting your health in an emergency*. Copies of this document are available from the HealthEd website www.healthed.govt.nz.

Short Notes

▶ New Playground Standards

The New Zealand Standard *Playground Equipment and Surfacing* (NZS5828:2004) revises and supersedes previous playground standards. Copies of New Zealand Standards can be purchased from www.standards.co.nz.

▶ Enhanced mosquito surveillance in the Auckland region

The Environmental Health team's "mossie team" has been undertaking enhanced surveillance throughout the Auckland region for the southern saltmarsh mosquito, *O camptorhynchus*. The Ministry of Health has requested enhanced national surveillance for *O camptorhynchus* following the recent find in the Marlborough region.

Maureen Turnbull



Maureen Turnbull joined the Environmental Health Team as Environmental Health Clerk in November 2003. She holds a Bachelor of Arts Degree in English and Geography and a Diploma of Teaching. Maureen comes from an education background and has worked in training and development, education administration and as a teacher. Her current areas of work include the administration of non-food controllable imports and resource consent submission co-ordination.