

'The Allergy Season' Media release



- **To begin on the first day of Spring.**
- **Inside-Out Picnics to be held around NZ.**

Allergy New Zealand, a national charity, is encouraging people to get behind their inaugural Allergy Season campaign by holding "Inside-Out Picnics" in their communities.

"The Inside-Out Picnics are based on the idea that when people are affected by allergies their lives are turned inside out, so we are asking people to have some fun round this idea to send that message," says Allergy New Zealand CEO, Mark Dixon.

Ideas include holding a picnic indoors with the decorations upside down, wearing clothes on backwards, perhaps having the balloons on the ground instead of hanging from the ceiling, running backwards races, etc.

"It is all about raising awareness and support for those living with allergies such as allergic rhinitis (hayfever) and how they are affected by it in Spring when everyone else seems to be outside enjoying the warmer weather," says Mark.

Many New Zealanders celebrate the first of September as marking the end of a cold, damp and dark winter. For hundreds of thousands of people however, Spring means high pollen readings and the misery of hayfever. This is why Allergy New Zealand is launching an annual campaign called The Allergy Season.

The Allergy Season communications will raise awareness of the increasing burden of allergies, which is the most common chronic health condition affecting New Zealanders. Allergy New Zealand says at least one in five is affected, and this is likely to rise. The causes of the increasing epidemic, happening globally, are not clear.

A major concern is the growing number of young children affected. Recent studies indicate one in ten have been diagnosed with allergies by two years of age. Most will develop problems before the age of 10, which means it is likely to be a life-long condition for nearly a million people in New Zealand.

Allergies are a chronic condition caused by the immune system over-reacting to something that is otherwise harmless to most people. A variety of conditions are caused including allergic rhinitis (hay fever), food allergies, insect or drug allergies, skin allergies such as eczema and urticaria, and asthma.

The 2014 Allergy Season campaign will cover three themes, with allergic rhinitis, most commonly known as hayfever, being the focus for September. Allergic rhinitis is the most common symptom of allergies. It causes a recurrent runny, stuffy, itchy nose, and frequent sneezing. It can also affect eyes, sinuses, throat and ears.

The main source of allergens in New Zealand are those that are air-borne, such as house dust-mites, which affect people year round, and pollens which are wind-blown during the spring season.

“We have a particularly allergenic environment in New Zealand” says Allergy New Zealand CEO, Mark Dixon. “Our humid, temperate climate is perfect for house dust-mites, and we have a lot of pollen-producing trees, grasses and weeds. Add windy weather patterns to that and life can be very unpleasant for a lot of people.”

Allergy New Zealand also states that with the increase in allergies, it is likely over a million people are affected in NZ, at least a quarter of them seriously.

“These are the ones whose allergies force them to take time off school and work, have to restrict outdoor activity and so on. It might not seem like much but when you count up the direct and indirect costs as well as poor quality of life – for life - for such a large number of people, it is in the millions of dollars every year – mostly borne by the individuals themselves”.

Auckland Allergy Specialist, Dr Andrew Baker, says that many people with allergic rhinitis (hay-fever) rely on self-diagnosing their allergies and over-the-counter medications.

“However most of them don’t have optimal control – they may not even know exactly what it is they are allergic to, let alone how to avoid exposure, and there are better medications for symptom control now than in the past.” He goes on to say that allergic rhinitis can make someone’s asthma worse, as well as disrupting sleep. “A couple of nights of disturbed sleep might be OK but if it goes on as long as the pollen allergy season lasts, it can have a significant impact on health, employment, education and so on. Furthermore many people sniff all through winter as well, mistakenly thinking they are getting colds, when its actually dustmite allergy, and

something can be done about it. Many rhinitis and asthma sufferers have not even been told there is a treatment called desensitisation.”

Retired Associate Professor of Plant Biology, Dr David Fountain, who also provides the pollen forecast for the MetService, explains that one of the issues for people is that pollen can be dispersed long distances depending on wind direction and strength.

“What you think you might be reacting to – such as a plant in your garden – might not be the culprit at all”, he says “and some pollens are more allergenic than others”.

Dr David Fountain also says one of the reasons for the increase in prevalence of pollen allergies is the spread of introduced plant species in New Zealand. “I suspect trees like olive and hazelnut might become significant allergens, as they are in Europe.”

Studies have revealed that hay fever has a huge impact on quality of life, including:

- 50 per cent of patients experience symptoms for more than four months per year and 20 per cent have symptoms for at least nine months per year
- Those affected suffer more frequent and prolonged sinus infection, and
- For those who also have red, itchy eyes, there is the risk of developing infective conjunctivitis due to frequent rubbing.
- Persistent symptoms and poor quality sleep can result in lethargy, poor concentration and behavioural changes and impact on learning in young children.
- Allergic rhinitis may predispose people to obstructive sleep apnoea, due to the upper airways collapsing during sleep. This results in reduced airflow, a drop in oxygen levels and disturbed sleep.
- Patients with allergic rhinitis also suffer from more frequent and prolonged respiratory infections, and asthma has been shown to be more difficult to control unless allergic rhinitis is also managed.
- Some patients with allergic rhinitis triggered by pollen allergy will also develop oral allergy syndrome to fresh fruit and vegetables.

There are strong arguments for taking allergies seriously. The direct and indirect costs and poorer quality of life have been recently estimated for Australia at \$30 billion a year – on a population basis that works out to over \$5.5 billion a year for New Zealand. Most of the costs are likely to be incurred by people of working age and their children.

“It is frustrating” says Dr Baker “because we know that immunotherapy can make a big difference for most people – where we desensitise the immune system so it no longer reacts – and is particularly effective if we start this in children so it minimises the development of asthma as well”.

About Allergy New Zealand

Allergy New Zealand is the national charity providing information, education and support to people with allergies, their caregivers, schools, health professionals and communities. It does not receive Government funding for its work.

Other key facts:

- **Allergy New Zealand's Pollen Calendar:** an updated version for August – November has been published in the Spring issue of 'Allergy Today' and will be available on request. (email allergy@allergy.org.nz)
- **Inside-out picnics** – refer to www.allergy.org.nz for ideas and resource
- **Other themes for the Allergy Season in 2014:**
 - October: Eczema
 - November/December: Holidaying with allergies
- To learn more about allergies and how to help others go to www.allergy.org.nz .

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We are happy to put you in contact with Allergy New Zealand's CEO and others quoted in this media release. We are also happy to work with you to find a family in your area to interview, and/or provide further information.

Links

Allergy NZ website: www.allergy.org.nz

Allergy Season page: www.allergy.org.nz/allergyseason

Allergy NZ Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/allergy.nz>