

Allergy New Zealand Media release



- Awareness campaign for the duration of Spring and beginning of Summer
- To highlight the burden of allergies - \$5 billion cost per annum
- Promoted by Allergy New Zealand, a national charity.

The summer holidays should be a fun and carefree time of the year for everyone, but for some it can be memorable for the wrong reasons. Insect stings, especially multiple stings are becoming much more common-place in New Zealand's favourite holiday spots. This is due in part to an explosion in the wasp population in New Zealand over the last 2 years.

Last summer, national media featured stories of people around the country being swarmed by wasps and having severe allergic reactions. Between 2010 and last year, ACC dealt with 4,160 claims arising from wasp attacks, with costs exceeding \$330,000.¹

So Allergy New Zealand, a national charity, is raising awareness of venom allergies this summer as part of their Allergy Season Campaign.

Those stories that made it into the mainstream media included one of an Auckland woman being rushed to the hospital when she disturbed a wasp nest while hiking near Bethells Beach. The wasps swarmed her, stinging her multiple times and she went in to anaphylactic shock. Thanks to the efforts of the medics aboard an Auckland Rescue Helicopter she made it to hospital in time to be saved from the potentially fatal condition.

Another told of a paramedic in Dargaville being attacked by wasps. He had previously been stung and never reacted, but this time he had gone into full anaphylactic shock. Now he must carry an adrenaline auto injector with him in case he has a reaction again.

Other wasp attacks were recorded in the Taumaranui and Nelson Lakes regions.

Allergy New Zealand CEO, Mark Dixon, says it is highly likely that there will be an increase in wasp populations nationally this summer due to the second mild winter in a row.

“Wasps target our holiday rubbish and waste sites and they can become magnets for wasp activity. That means high wasp activity in peak holiday areas and wasp nests close to food sources. There will be tears, but we can take precautions.”

Furthermore Mark says those who have previously been stung and have not had an allergic reaction are still at risk this summer.

“There are two main risk factors from becoming sensitised to insect stings which can happen at any age. One is being stung multiple times at one time, and the other is being stung at relatively close intervals - for example being stung repeatedly over a number of days or weeks. That’s why forestry workers, beekeepers and their families or neighbours are at higher risk of becoming allergic to stings.”

Insect sting anaphylaxis can also be fatal even on the first reaction.²

Although there is treatment available for those allergic to insect stings, Mark says the lack of DHB allergy specialists particularly in the South Island and other parts of rural New Zealand, means treatments for venom allergies, such as desensitisation, can not be offered to the many needing it.

“Desensitisation is a traditional medical treatment which is highly effective in preventing systemic allergic reactions to insect stings. Clinical evidence shows that it can provide up to 98 per cent protection against allergic reactions.”²

Allergy New Zealand suggests that to keep safe from stings this summer allergy families, camping grounds, DOC and medical emergency departments need to have their Action Plans up to date, as well as checking the expiry date of their auto injectors. All patients who have had systemic reactions (including anaphylaxis, hives or swelling in parts of the body) to insect stings should carry adrenaline in an easy to administer form, such as an EpiPen, and should wear a Medic Alert bracelet. More information is available on the Allergy NZ website; www.allergy.org.nz

However, it is acknowledged that many of those at risk may not be able to afford an auto injector. Mark says Allergy NZ is working on achieving this goal. He states the organisation “currently has an application in front of PHARMAC (heard by PTAC in May 2013) to fund auto injectors for those at risk of anaphylactic shock from bee/wasp stings.”

Allergy New Zealand would also love to see adrenaline auto injectors made a mandatory item in first aid kits, particularly at facilities hosting or charged with the care of holiday makers – camping grounds, DOC Rangers, Surf Lifesavers, etc. The organisation reports receiving many requests from organisations involved in outdoor activities, wanting guidance on this issue.

What should I do if I am allergic to insect stings?

- Wear closed footwear when outside.
- Limbs should be covered when outdoors.
- Avoid strong perfumes - they can attract insects.
- Avoid pastel coloured clothing.
- Rubbish should be disposed of promptly - wasps are attracted to rubbish and rotting fruit.
- Avoid eating sweets outdoors.
- Have some one else do the gardening and the lawns!
- A professional pest control agent should destroy wasp nests promptly.
- Use an insect repellent.
- If you get stung, the site of the sting should be treated with ice. Applying a tourniquet to a stung limb can slow venom absorption. The tourniquet should be released intermittently. Most bee stings result in the stinger being left behind. The stinger should be flicked off with the edge of a piece of paper. Grasping the stinger with its accompanying venom sac will result in further injection of venom. If a large local reaction develops, it may respond to local measures such as ice or the use an antihistamine.
- Patients who have had systemic reactions to insect stings should carry an auto injector at all times. Systemic reactions include anaphylaxis, angioedema (swelling) or urticaria (hives) in other areas of the body.

About Allergy New Zealand

Allergy New Zealand has been a national charity in NZ for over 30 years, providing information, education and support to people with allergies, their caregivers, schools, health professionals and communities.

The Allergy Season will be used to promote 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.

The Allergy Season Promotional Periods:

September: Hayfever

October: Eczema

November/December: Holidaying with allergies

Data Points:

- Over one-third of New Zealanders suffer from an allergy-related health issue – 1,500,000 people
- Allergy New Zealand receives no Government funding, and is totally reliant on the donations and grants of its supporters

- 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>

References

¹ Stone, A. (2014, October 4). Vicious sting that's hurting all of us. In *The New Zealand Herald*. Retrieved November 18, 2014, from http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11336645

²- DBK Golden, May, 2007 : Immunology Allergy Clinic, North America