

10 December 2009

VISITING THE BEACHES THIS SUMMER

Earlier this year, there were 18 incidents involving dogs falling ill, and five of these dogs died after coming into contact with sea slugs on Hauraki Gulf beaches. An investigation into the issue has found the sea slugs contained tetrodotoxin (TTX), which can be extremely toxic for humans and pets.

Below you will find the answers to some common questions, and where to go for more information.

Is it safe to go to the beach this summer?

Yes, but with caution. Avoid contact with sea slugs and other marine life washed up on beaches:

- Children and pets need to be supervised on Hauraki Gulf beaches.
- Adults, children and pets should not eat anything found washed up on any Hauraki Gulf beach.
- Parents need to be aware of where their children are swimming or playing and what they are handling.
- Sea slugs on any beach must be avoided. If you find one, mark the spot, leave well alone, and phone the city or district council, who will collect the slug safely.

First aid response for TTX poisoning

Early symptoms of TTX poisoning include:

- Numbness, tingling, prickling of the skin
- Nausea
- Paralysis
- Difficulty breathing
- Irregular heartbeat

Quick and appropriate first aid is crucial.

If the person stops breathing:

- Dial 111 immediately
 - Mouth to mouth breathing is advised until an ambulance arrives, but the resuscitator must thoroughly wash the patient's mouth area first to prevent risk of further poisoning.
- NB: chest compressions are not needed unless there is no pulse.

For further information on public health call Auckland Regional Public Health Service on 09 623 4600.

Information on a First Aid Response for Tetrodotoxin (TTX) Poisoning is also available on the ARPHS website http://www.arphs.govt.nz/Media_Releases/downloads/TetrodotoxinFirstAid.asp

..or telephone 09 623 4600. If you are concerned, call your doctor or go to a medical centre.

Has the water been tested?

The Auckland Regional Council's routine water quality tests have come back normal.

What should I do if we find a sea slug on the beach?

Avoid it. We strongly suggest you do not touch it. Instead, report its presence to the local council for their response. If you can, mark the spot in some way so that others will know to avoid it, and to help the council officer to find it.

What do I do if I accidentally step on a sea slug, or come into contact with a sea slug?

If you, or someone you know, comes into contact with a sea slug, wash the area immediately, and look out for the symptoms and signs of TTX poisoning (see above). Seek medical attention immediately if these develop. If you fear you may have ingested any sea slug material, seek medical attention immediately – don't wait for symptoms or signs of poisoning

What should I do if my dog gets sick after a trip to the beach?

Take it to the vet and tell the vet which beach you were at, and when, so that they can notify MAF Biosecurity NZ if necessary. They will assess if your dog has come into contact with TTX.

What if we find other dead animals or marine life on the beach?

Avoid handling, and report it to MAF Biosecurity NZ on 0800 80 99 66, or your local council.

What is being done to prevent the sea slugs from returning to North Shore beaches?

Unfortunately we can't prevent this, as it is a natural occurrence. There have been no further known strandings of sea slugs on Hauraki Gulf beaches since July 2009.

Where did the sea slugs originate from? Is there a chance of them coming back?

Sea slugs are not uncommon on New Zealand's beaches. What is new is the identification of TTX - which needs to be avoided.

Are the beaches monitored? If so, how often?

The ARC routinely monitors the water quality of the Hauraki Gulf and Manukau Harbour. Water quality is monitored monthly for a range of physical and chemical measures.

Environmental Protection and Beach Patrol officers from local councils regularly visit the beach to check for marine debris and life stranded on the beaches.

Who is responsible for helping with this issue?

The interagency response to this issue has included the following: Auckland Regional Public Health Service, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry Biosecurity NZ, Department of Conservation, Auckland Regional Council, North Shore City Council, Manukau City Council, Auckland City Council, Rodney District Council, NZ Food Safety Authority, Environment Waikato, Waikato Public Health Service, Aquaculture New Zealand, New Zealand Centre for Conservation Medicine, National Poisons Centre and the Cawthron Institute.

What precautions are being taken?

The public can exercise caution by following ARPHS's guidelines. ARC and other agencies have plans in place for a response if there is another major incident involving toxic sea slugs.

What is being done to keep the public informed about the issue?

The key agencies have worked with the media, signage has been erected on beaches, and North Shore City Council has provided the public with information. The Auckland Regional Public Health Service and ARC websites are kept up to date with the latest information about the issue.

How do I keep up to date on this issue?

The Auckland Regional Public Health Service regularly updates its website with the latest information. Visit http://www.arphs.govt.nz/Media_Releases/20091022_HaurakiGulf.asp

The Auckland Regional Council has published a technical report and frequently asked questions these are available at <http://www.arc.govt.nz/seaslugs>