

Supporting mental health in Kaikoura a priority

Health officials are crediting Kaikoura residents and visitors for their vigilance in preventing a gastro outbreak but are concerned about the high levels of anxiety and stress being experienced in the community.

Dr Ramon Pink, Canterbury Medical Officer of Health, who returned from Kaikoura today, says there are currently no signs of any gastro outbreaks in the area.

"The community and the relief workers have taken to heart the importance of boiling or treating water and hand washing. Everyone needs to keep it up as gastro bugs have the potential to spread like wildfire through a community. With so little clean water available, any gastro bug would be extremely difficult to control," he says.

Dr Pink acknowledges that this is a very tough time for people in Kaikoura.

"It's a very challenging environment for everyone. What makes things so hard is the fact Kaikoura's so cut off – making it difficult to get supplies in and people out. This is something we didn't have to deal with in the Canterbury quakes of 2010 and 2011.

"I was struck by how strong the community is and how they're coming together to support visitors, as well as each other. While many are pulling up their sleeves, helping others and just getting on with things, support will be required well into the future.

"Mental health staff are in place and providing immediate support but as we've learned from the Canterbury quakes, recovery takes time."

Dr Pink says as well as immediate concerns like housing, electricity and clean water, residents and local businesses are concerned about what the future holds.

Dr Pink also advises for people to keep out of the sea and rivers during this time because of possible contamination.

"While some surfers are keen to see what surf breaks may be coming following the seabed movement caused by the quakes, they need to avoid the water until it's been cleared of contamination."

Since Monday, Dr Pink, fellow Medical Officer of Health Dr Alistair Humphrey and four Health Protection Officers, have supported response efforts on the ground in Kaikoura. This work has included checking water supplies, providing hand sanitiser and bleach, promoting public health messages, supporting other agencies involved in the response and reporting back to health authorities on the issues being faced.

In addition to public health staff, the Canterbury DHB has sent about 20 clinical staff to Kaikoura, including two psychologists to support the psychosocial recovery, nurses, allied health, a GP and Pharmacist.



Dr Ramon Pink

Four gastro cases in Waiau, North Canterbury

Four people from the North Canterbury settlement of Waiau have contracted norovirus over the past two days.

Two adults and two children from three different families are affected. All are isolated in their own homes.

In otherwise healthy individuals Norovirus, a particularly contagious gastro bug, usually resolves quickly with fluids over a period of a few days. "It can be particularly serious for frail older people and those with weak immune systems.

On the advice of the Canterbury Medical Officer of Health, Civil Defence have closed the Welfare Centre and communal kitchen in Waiau.

Some of the cases had visited the Welfare Centre in recent days.

"Although communal kitchens are often a vital part of an emergency response, they can also be the focus of spread of gastro bugs," said Dr Humphrey.

"The good news is that most households in Waiau now have power and running water so families can cater for themselves at home."

"This is a timely reminder for every community in North Canterbury that scrupulous handwashing or use of hand sanitiser gel is essential to prevent the spread of gastro," said Dr Humphrey.

If anyone in the Hurunui area needs assistance with accommodation, they should call Hurunui Civil Defence on (03) 314 8816.

"Any food that defrosted while the power was out should now be disposed of. All hot food should be served piping hot, and all fresh meat, seafood and poultry should be kept chilled in the fridge.

"Importantly all water should be boiled before drinking, used for cooking or cleaning your teeth.

"Anyone with any gastro symptoms should definitely keep out of the kitchen," Dr Humphrey said.

"I can't stress enough the importance of cleaning your hands thoroughly before preparing and eating food and after you've been to the toilet. If you don't have running water, use hand sanitiser to clean your hands," he said.

"Anyone with symptoms such as vomiting and diarrhoea should stay home and phone for health advice. Phone your own GP or Kaikoura Health on (03) 319 3500. Your call will be answered 24/7 by a nurse who will provide free health advice.

"I am pleased to report, that to date there have been no reported cases of gastro in the Kaikoura area. This is a credit to everyone who is managing to keep up their hand hygiene despite the trying conditions and lack of water," Dr Humphrey said.

If you can't boil water, add quarter of a teaspoon of household bleach to two litres of water and leave to stand for two hours before using.

Gastro outbreak biggest risk for isolated Kaikoura residents now

Canterbury DHB's Community and Public Health officials arrived in Kaikoura yesterday and are focusing on preventing the spread of disease.

Canterbury Medical Officer of Health Dr Alistair Humphrey says the biggest health risk is the possible outbreak of a gastro bug.

"My personal view is that people aren't being vigilant enough about hand washing and ensuring drinking water is safe to drink," Dr Humphrey says.

"While water supplies are gradually being fixed, it remains crucial people continue to boil their drinking water or treat it with bleach. The water is not safe to drink.

"Unless it's bottled water, don't assume it's safe to drink. Even water people are getting from the back of trucks needs to be boiled or treated.

"People should also not eat anything gathered from oceans and rivers due to possible contamination."

Dr Humphrey says increasing numbers of people are presenting at Kaikoura hospital with anxiety related problems

"Three days in many people are exhausted and anxious, and it doesn't help that people can't have showers. It's important that people do what they can to look after themselves and connect with those around them. Nobody is in this alone."

Canterbury DHB is working with other agencies to ensure there are sufficient supplies of hand sanitiser and bleach.

To treat water add 1 teaspoon of household (unscented) bleach per 10 litres of water and leave for 30 minutes (i.e. just under 1/4 tsp of bleach for a two litre container).

Public health officials arrive in Kaikoura

Canterbury Medical Officer of Health Dr Alistair Humphrey and two Canterbury DHB Health Protection Officers flew to Kaikoura today to provide public health support to the isolated region.

Dr Alistair Humphrey says this is a critical time for preventing infectious disease outbreaks. "Power cuts, damaged sewerage infrastructure, people sharing accommodation and a lack of access to clean drinking water can create ideal conditions for the spread of infectious diseases," Dr Humphrey says.

"We will be working to ensure people have access to the right information and that systems are in place to address any water and sanitary health issues, or psychosocial issues that may emerge.

"It's up to everyone in and around the area most affected by the earthquakes to do everything they can to prevent disease outbreaks. Everyone needs to thoroughly wash their hands or use hand sanitiser after toileting, and before and after eating or preparing food.

"People in the affected area need to boil their drinking water or, if that's not possible, treat it with ¼ teaspoon of bleach per two litre container of water."

Dr Humphrey says anyone who is even remotely unwell should contact their GP team immediately, limit contact with other people, and not prepare food.

Thinking about mental health and psychosocial support

Dr Lucy D'Aeth, Chair of the Greater Christchurch Psychosocial Committee, says ongoing aftershocks, sleep deprivation and the enormity of the clean-up job may now begin to hit home.

D'Aeth says it's important people check on their neighbours and spend time on things, which are good for their wellbeing.

"One of the best things you can do to look after yourself is to connect with others in your community. You don't need to go through this alone.

"Helping others and giving your time can make a big difference, whether it's helping someone with a big clean up job or spending time talking to people about how they are doing.

"Doing exercise is also a proven mood booster – even a little bit can help a lot."

As part of the response to these earthquakes, additional staff have been rostered on to the Canterbury Support Line. The free phone line (0800 777 846) is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week and can arrange appropriate support for people affected by the earthquake.



Public health staff deployed to assist with the response to the Kaikoura earthquake. From left to right: Medical Officer of Health Dr Alistair Humphrey, and Health Protection Officers Laura Bruce and Denise Tully.