

MEDIA RELEASE

26 February 2016

Planting your winter greens? Five simple steps could save your life

Nelson Marlborough Health Protection Officers are advising people to take five simple steps when handling potting mix and compost, to avoid contracting potentially-fatal Legionnaires' disease.

Rica Salamat, a Health Protection Officer with the Nelson Marlborough District Health Board, says that many people don't realise the risks they take when working with potting mix.

"Legionnaire's disease is potentially fatal but reasonably preventable if you follow simple precautions," Ms Salamat says.

The five recommended safety steps are:

1. Open potting mix bags carefully using scissors, rather than by ripping them
2. Wear a disposable face mask and gloves, and open the bag away from your face
3. Do your potting in a well-ventilated area outdoors
4. Dampen down the potting mix or compost with a sprinkle of water to reduce airborne dust
5. Wash your hands thoroughly after handling potting mix, or gardening.

About Legionella bacteria and Legionnaires' disease

- Legionella is a bacterium commonly found in soil and organic soil improvers such as potting mix or compost
- It thrives in warm, moist conditions and becomes dangerous when dust or droplets from one of these products infected with Legionella bacteria is inhaled. It can then cause a severe, even fatal disease
- Anyone can catch Legionnaire's but some people are more vulnerable. People over 50 years of age, those with a long-term illness, people with low immunity, and smokers.
- Symptoms include dry coughing, high fever, chills, diarrhoea, shortness of breath, chest pains, headaches, excessive sweating, nausea, vomiting and abdominal pain.
- Anyone who gets these symptoms should see their doctor straight away and let them know you have been handling potting compost recently.
- **The GP will then inform the Health Protection Officers at your local Public Health Service and they will investigate the possible cause and work to prevent anyone else getting sick from the same source.**

Further information

- <https://www.healthed.govt.nz/resource/safer-and-healthier-gardening>
- <http://www.dbh.govt.nz/bomd-legionellosis>

Ends

Contact: Stephanie Gray, Communications Manager, Nelson Marlborough District Health Board
Private Bag 18, Nelson 7042, New Zealand
DDI: 03 546 1824, Internal ext 7824 or Cell 027 4466 799