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PRESS RELEASE BY THE SUPERINTENDENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH Possible health effects in view of Etna eruptions

In view of the recent eruptions of Mount Etna in Sicily and the close proximity to Malta, the Health Authorities are alerting the public to the possible health effects. The effects on health depend on various factors including ongoing eruptions and the wind speed and direction, which are not predicable and as a result of which effects can vary.

Effects of ash on health may be divided into several categories: respiratory effects, eye symptoms, and skin irritation depending on the exposure.

In some eruptions, ash particles can be so fine that they are breathed deep into the lungs. With high exposure, even healthy individuals will experience chest discomfort with increased coughing and irritation. People suffering from asthma or other lung problems such as bronchitis and emphysema, and severe heart problems, are most at risk. This can lead to breathing problems as well as the exacerbation of heart and lung conditions.

Direct exposure can cause eye irritation as pieces of grit can cause painful scratches in the front of the eye (corneal abrasions) as well as conjunctivitis and skin irritation for some people, especially if the ash is acidic.

Monitoring the weather reports is advised, and people who are more at risk are advised to take special care to limit exposure and stay indoors when possible, to keep windows and doors closed, and to talk to their doctor if any symptoms develop.

The general public is reminded to wash fruits and vegetables properly.
