**Dust Advice for Schools and Early Childhood Education Centres (ECEs)**

**What do we know?**

Te Whatu Ora is working with other agencies to assess the public health impacts of dust generated from airborne silt in Hawke’s Bay and Tairawhiti.

The silt testing programme as part of the Hawke’s Bay Silt Recovery Taskforce   
(a partnership between Hastings District Council and Hawke’s Bay Regional Council) has reassuringly indicated that the likelihood of significant contamination of the silt by heavy metals, herbicides, and pesticides is likely to be very low.

However, airborne dust, from any source including dried out silt, is not healthy to breathe. The dust itself can be irritating to the eyes and upper airways, and for those with underlying heart or lung conditions, like asthma, can worsen their symptoms. This is particularly important for babies and children, who can be more vulnerable to health impacts from air pollution.

Until more is known from air quality monitoring in affected regions, it is important to take precautions during times when dust is a significant issue.

**How to decide if precautions are needed:**

Unfortunately, there are no clear criteria to decide when precautions are needed at this stage, so a common-sense approach is recommended:

* If you think dust levels are high (e.g. you can see, smell or taste dust in the air), it is a good idea to take precautions.
* If visibility is reduced (distant objects are less visible than usual) this can be a sign of high levels of airborne dust, and it is a good idea to take precautions.

**Children's health:**

* Ensure that children with respiratory or other pre-existing health conditions follow their treatment plan. Talk with your school’s public health nurse if you need any support with this.
* When dust levels are high keep an eye on children’s health, watch for symptoms like coughing, wheezing or difficulty breathing.
* Seek urgent medical health if anyone has trouble breathing, call 111 for an ambulance.
* If outside, wearing sunglasses can help reduce the amount of dust getting in your eyes as well as protect them from the sun.

**Precautions to reduce exposure of children when dust levels are high:**

* If possible:
  + keep children indoors when dust levels are high, and
  + keep doors and windows closed, and
  + stay in air-conditioned rooms and set the air conditioner to recirculate indoor air.
* If children do go outside, try to minimise the amount of time outside and avoid vigorous exercise.
* Keep children inside if they have any symptoms like coughing or irritated eyes.

Even if all children aren’t being kept inside, consider providing an indoor area where children can choose to stay inside (for example, if they have asthma or other health conditions, are sensitive to dust, or are worried about the dust).

**How to keep indoor air clean:**

* Check seals around doors and windows.
* Check air conditioners1:
  + Make sure the filters are kept clean.
  + Make sure the filters are high efficiency. HEPA filters are recommended.
* Regularly clean inside areas to remove dust:
  + Use wet methods (mops and damp cloths).
  + Avoid dry sweeping and dusting as it can kick dust up into the air.
  + Vacuuming can increase dust levels so try to use vacuum cleaners with a HEPA filter.
* On days when dust levels are low, open doors and windows to ‘air out’ buildings.

**If exposure to dust cannot be avoided:**

* If they feel comfortable children over 2 can wear dust masks.2
* Proper face-fitting masks like P2 and N95 provide the best personal protection; however, even surgical masks will still offer some protection from dust.
* Make sure masks fit correctly. The mask should fully cover the nose and mouth without gaps around the nose cheeks and chin. Straps should go above and below the ears.
* Masks should be replaced regularly (in accordance with manufacturer recommendations).
* Straps should go above and below the ears.

