

# Health concerns rise with warming weather in disaster-ravaged northeastern Japan

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As life in evacuation shelters drags on and the rainy season is ready to start in northeastern Japan, hit hard by the March 11 Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami, measures against food poisoning and infectious diseases are becoming an increasingly pressing issue.

In some coastal municipalities in Iwate and Miyagi prefectures that suffered great tsunami damage, waterworks systems have yet to be restored following the March 11 disaster. As of late May, for example, over 40 percent of households in Rikuzentakata were without water, and portable toilets were seen lined up at evacuation shelters.

Receiving an order from the municipal government, on June 2, Tokyo-based non-profit organization One Dish Aid cleaned and disinfected toilets in three different locations in the city. Tests conducted on door knobs, toilet seats, walls and other parts in two of the locations found fecal bacteria, which had not been detected in April. The third location was found to have hemolytic bacteria.

There were almost no traces of common bacteria in the toilets after cleaning and sterilization, but One Dish Aid warns that more steps must be taken in the coming weeks: "We must be careful not only with portable toilets, but with other things that many people use, like faucets. We shouldn't overestimate the efficacy of ethanol antiseptics, and instead simultaneously use hypochlorous sanitizers."

The spread of viruses like noro and influenza, which are usually seen in the winter months, is also a major concern. According to public health departments in Miyagi, Iwate and Fukushima prefectures, there were outbreaks of type-B influenza in schools and elsewhere in May.

"There is a possibility that an outbreak of infectious diseases at schools could lead to outbreaks at evacuation shelters, with children as mediators," said an official in the health promotion division of the Iwate Prefectural Government.

Local residents' immune systems are worn down by unbalanced diets that are still a problem in some disaster sites. The local public health department in the Iwate Prefecture town of Noda looked into the food being consumed by residents at evacuation shelters, and found they were lacking in vitamin C and dietary fiber. Officials said they plan to provide nutrition counseling to residents leaving shelters for temporary housing.

Meanwhile, in the Miyagi prefecture city of Ishinomaki, flies attracted to decaying fish at an Ishinomaki-Port seafood processing plant destroyed in the tsunami have been seen at an evacuation center at Kazuma Elementary School located about 2 kilometers away. Residents have been careful about maintaining hygiene standards, but still worry about the havoc "quake disaster flies" could wreak, if they were to get to their food.

"We'd never seen flies this big before the quake," one resident said.

The Japan Pest Control Association (JPCA) says that while flies are not a direct cause of infectious

disease, they can transmit such bacteria as E. coli O157.

In tsunami-ravaged areas still strewn with rubble, municipalities are distributing slaked lime to use as a disinfectant. While experts at the Ishinomaki public health department say that slaked lime is not very effective when applied without first removing the remaining rubble, the JPCA says that it is a necessary stopgap measure when there is no time for prior debris removal.

In Iwate and Miyagi prefectures, a total of nine cases of tetanus have been reported. While the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare says that they were caused by wounds suffered in the tsunami, local health departments warn residents of the risk of contracting tetanus during debris clean-up.

“During clean-up efforts, we’d like people to make sure not only to wear masks, but to wear thick-soled shoes,” said an official at the Shiogama public health department in Miyagi Prefecture.

***Mainichi Shimbun***

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