

(Press Release from World Health Organization)

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Update on Japan nuclear energy plant event

21 March 2010 | GENEVA -- As the response to the massive earthquake and subsequent tsunami has continued, the Government of Japan has been working to control the damaged Daiichi nuclear power plant in Fukushima, Japan. Power has been restored to the facility. This is a substantial gain, as the technicians working to stabilize the cooling mechanisms of the six nuclear reactors at the site have up to now been hampered by lack of electricity.

Although the situation at the power plant is improving, WHO is aware of the level of concern resulting from the release of radiation into the environment.

WHO does not consider that it is currently necessary to advise travel restrictions to Japan, and has produced advice for travellers. WHO's technical experts considered the safety of travel in light of the information they are receiving from the Government of Japan, the United Nations International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and WHO's Western Pacific Regional Office, and the compromised infrastructure in the areas most hard-hit by the earthquake and subsequent tsunami. The Organization is constantly monitoring the situation and, should conditions change, WHO will re-evaluate its advice.

WHO has received questions about whether people should take potassium iodide. These pills are only useful to protect against the effects of radioiodine, a radioactive form of iodine, and one of several kinds of radioactive materials which might be released in an accident at a nuclear facility. Potassium iodide should be taken only if there is an immediate risk of exposure to radioiodine. WHO has published guidance about when it is appropriate to use potassium iodide and advises against self-medication.

Tests have demonstrated that the release of radioactivity has contaminated certain foods grown in prefectures in the vicinity of the nuclear power plant. Low-level contamination of drinking water at some sites has also been reported. WHO is collaborating with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and other technical partners to assess and advise on the implications of this data.