

High rates of stomach bacteria in Arctic hamlet: study

H. Pylori results confirm residents' suspicions, raise cancer links

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A recent study of residents in Aklavik, N.W.T., has found a shockingly high infection rate of a stomach bacterium that has been linked to cancer.

Breath tests and stomach biopsies were done earlier this month on 240 adults in the hamlet of 600. Of those, 55 per cent came back positive for the *Helicobacter pylori* (H. pylori) bacterium.

The bacterium is normally found in 10 to 20 per cent of the general population. It is usually harmless, but can contribute to ulcers and has been linked to stomach cancer in some cases.

"It really confirms what the community was concerned about," Dr. Justin Cheung, a medical research fellow at the University of Alberta who helped gather the results, told CBC News.

"This is very interesting to see such a high incidence of *Helicobacter pylori* infection."

Residents have long suspected that a high number of H. pylori infections may explain why so many of their family members and other residents have died from stomach cancer.

Exact numbers are not known, but one local family is said to have lost five relatives to the disease.

"I think we were still sort of shocked at the high rate of positive testing," said Aklavik Mayor Knute Hansen, who had already known he was positive for the bacterium.

"But at least we know now."

Hansen added that residents' efforts to get doctors to come up to Aklavik and study the high stomach cancer rates have finally paid off.

"It just shows that if the community works together on an issue, that you can achieve some degree of success," he said.

Cheung said researchers still need to find out what strains of the bacterium are infecting people, a process that can take several more weeks, then determine what kinds of antibiotics are best to fight the infection.

Cheung and other doctors will travel back to Aklavik in April to talk to patients about their treatment options.

"The research team has been quite enthusiastic about this project," he said.

"We have an opportunity here to help a community that had a concern. The preliminary results show that there is a true concern, and there is an opportunity for us to help the community out."