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# Northern News Services



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## Tests show half of Aklavik has H. pylori

### Brodie Thomas

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AKLAVIK - The preliminary results from the screening for cancer-causing stomach bacteria in Aklavik residents revealed an elevated rate of infection in the community.

"The breath samples showed 55 per cent (of Aklavik's population has the bacteria) but the biopsies look like they're about 55 per cent too," said Dr. Justin Cheung of the University of Alberta.

Cheung suspects that the high rate of H. pylori infection in Aklavik may be behind the community's high number of deaths due to stomach cancer. Although the numbers are not available for Aklavik specifically, stomach cancer ranks as the third most common cause of cancer fatalities in the NWT. Nationwide it only ranks ninth.

Those statistics as well as concerns raised by residents of Aklavik contributed to the push to get town-wide screening for H. pylori in February.

"The H. pylori bacterium and stomach cancer are definitely linked in that there's a higher risk, a fourfold risk, of stomach cancer with H. pylori," said Cheung.

It is believed that the H. pylori bacterium is spread through contact with infected fecal matter or through contact with saliva, although more research is needed in this area.

Since the Aklavik findings were announced, Chief Charlie Furlong has been raising questions about the quality of Aklavik's water source.

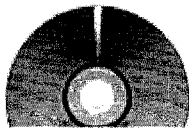
Cheung, however, said it is unlikely that Aklavik's water is the source of bacteria.

"The community thinks it is water supply but that has never actually been shown, just because the bacteria doesn't grow that well in water. But we're going to look at that. We want to test a water sample," he said.

Cheung was careful to point out that having the bacteria in your stomach does not mean you will get cancer. It only increases the risk of cancer over time.

"It causes chronic inflammation and that causes changes in the stomach lining. But the bacterium has to be in there a long, long time. It can't just be a few weeks or even just a few years."

The biopsies taken in January involved taking a sample of the stomach by threading a small device into the stomach through the patient's nostril.



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Mayor Knute Hansen decided to get screened and was surprised to learn that he was infected with the bacterium.

"I didn't think I would be positive. I guess I'm one of the 55 per cent," said Hansen.

Nevertheless, he is glad that he got tested.

"It was a bit unnerving but they're going to prescribe an intensive antibiotic therapy once they decide the best medications to use. I guess they'll start that in a month or so."

Cheung said that people in Aklavik who still wish to be screened can go to the health centre for a breath test. Both Cheung and Hansen suspect that those who did not take part in the January tests may now want to be tested.

The next part of the study is to identify the exact strain of H. pylori bacterium so that the most effective forms of antibiotics can be prescribed.

Although there is a clear link between having the bacteria and contracting cancer, Cheung can only speculate that killing off the bacteria will help reduce the high rate of stomach cancer in Aklavik.

"We think that is the way to do it, although there is no clear evidence yet that elimination of H. pylori will do that because it's not the only cause of stomach cancer," he said.

