

Taking aim at cancer

Many in Aklavik, Northwest Territories are waiting, along with medical researchers, to find out if antibiotics killed a bacterium that may be linked to high stomach cancer rates in their community.

Published: 27.05.2009 00:19

More than 100 people in Aklavik, Northwest Territories are waiting, along with medical researchers, to find out if antibiotics killed a bacterium that may be linked to high stomach cancer rates in their community, says CBC News.

A total 182 adults in the Arctic community tested positive last year for helicobacter pylori (H. pylori), a stomach bacterium that is usually harmless, but is linked to stomach cancer in some cases.

Researchers came to the community in January 2008 after residents in the hamlet of about 600 pointed to a high number of deaths from stomach cancer.

"I was a little scared, thinking, like, you know, why me?" resident Gladys Edwards told CBC News, recalling when she learned she was positive for H. pylori.

The exact rate of stomach cancer occurrences in Aklavik is not known, but residents have long reported losing multiple family members to the disease.

While the bacterium is normally harmless, Edwards said she was worried because both her grandparents died of stomach cancer.

Edwards said she didn't want to take the risk: she was among 111 affected residents who took a 10-day course of antibiotics to try to get rid of the bacterium.

Scientists were recently back in Aklavik, testing some of those 111 people again for H. pylori, to determine if the antibiotics worked.

"We're waiting to find out whose treatments were effective, and offering second-line therapy to those that were not," said Janis Huntington, the project's fieldwork co-ordinator.

Edwards received her results already: "It came back successful, and it was negative," she said.

At the same time, Edwards said she knows getting rid of the stomach bacterium is just one defence against stomach cancer. She has started to eat better and exercise more, she said.

Huntington said researchers will return to Aklavik in a few weeks to tell more

residents if they have been able to get rid of the H. pylori in their stomachs.

They will also be offering tests and treatment to anyone in the hamlet who missed it the first time around.