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Munarhiliqiyikkut Inuuhiriknirmullu
Department of Health and Social Services
Ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux

Fact Sheet #2: HTLV-1 in Nunavut

When was HTLV-1 reported in Nunavut?

The Department of Health and Social Services found out in June 2005. The Human T-cell Lymphotropic Virus, Type 1 (HTLV-1) was found in the blood of a person with adult T-cell lymphoma/leukemia.

How is the health system protecting Nunavummiut?

The Department of Health and Social Services is responding in a number of ways:

- Offering confidential testing to persons at risk or persons who feel they might be at risk for contracting HTLV-1,
- Finding out who has HTLV-1 through contact tracing, and
- Promoting behaviours that reduce the risk of transmitting HTLV-1, such as safe sex. HTLV-1 is preventable.

The department will also do anonymous, unlinked testing of blood samples taken from across Nunavut to see how prevalent the HTLV-1 virus is in the general population. Within six months, there will be enough information to determine the next step(s) to take to safeguard the health of Nunavummiut.

Who should be tested for HTLV-1?

The department recommends that the following groups should be tested:

- People who have had unprotected sexual intercourse or blood-to-blood contact with people with HTLV-1. Health staff will notify these people directly and in confidence.
- Women who are breastfeeding or plan to breastfeed soon. The HTLV-1 virus can be transmitted through breast feeding.
- People who are concerned that they might have been exposed to HTLV-1, for whatever reason. Call your health centre or public health office to arrange for a test.

Does everyone need to be tested for HTLV-1?

No. People in the at-risk groups should be tested. The department also plans to add HTLV-1 testing to the pre-natal screening process.

What resources are being used to respond to HTLV-1 in Nunavut?

All health care providers in Nunavut have been briefed so they can provide testing and counselling services. The federal Public Health Agency is providing advice and information. The National Virology Lab will help with the blood tests from both the contact tracing process and the anonymous, unlinked testing of blood samples.

What does the HTLV-1 test involve?

The test involves counselling both before and after the test. You will be asked to read and sign a consent form. A small sample of blood will be taken. Test results usually take 4 to 6 weeks. The test is voluntary – no one has to take it.

What services are available in Nunavut for people infected with HTLV-1?

Usually most people with HTLV-1 will never get sick from it. People with HTLV-1 will be given regular blood tests to monitor any changes in their health. They will be offered counselling. They will be given the information they need to prevent transmission to babies, sexual partners, or people they may have blood-to-blood contact with.

How long has HTLV-1 been present in Nunavut?

The Department of Health & Social Services believes the virus has been present for quite some time. It usually takes 10-20 years before HTLV-1 triggers a disease process, such as leukemia/lymphoma. HTLV-1 is a rare virus but this is not the first time it has been found in Canada. It is not a reportable infection in some provinces and territories. It is a reportable infection in Nunavut.

How many people in Nunavut have HTLV-1?

No one knows the answer to that yet. So far the department has identified several people (less than 20) who test positive for the HTLV-1 virus. Work is now underway to test the known intimate contacts of these people (sexual contact, blood-to-blood contact or breast feeding). It is important that everyone respect the right to privacy of the affected people. A person who tests positive does not pose a risk to anyone they have casual contact with.

See also the H&SS Fact Sheet #1 on the HTLV-1 Virus

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