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Gut Cancer Foundation Highlights Modifiable Risk Factors for Stomach Cancer in Māori and Pasifika

August is Stomach Cancer Awareness Month, and the Gut Cancer Foundation want to highlight factors driving inequities in stomach cancer rates between Māori and Pasifika and non-Māori.

In 2022 the Gut Cancer Foundation ran a campaign encouraging Māori to know their whakapapa to highlight the prevalence of the CDH1 genetic mutation in whānau Māori. Those that carry the mutation have a 70% chance of developing stomach cancer. If one direct relative is known to have stomach cancer in a whānau, genetic testing is available.

This year, the foundation wants to raise awareness of the impact the bacteria *Helicobacter Pylori* (*H.pylori*) can have on Māori and Pasifika. Stomach cancer is one of the cancers with the greatest inequities for Māori and Pasifika when compared with non-Māori. Māori are 3 times more likely to develop stomach cancer than NZ European communities and are over 3.5 times more likely to die from the disease.

H. pylori, a group 1 carcinogen, causes nearly 90% of non-cardia gastric cancers, with the lifetime risk of developing gastric cancer of approximately 3 percent in those infected. Māori and Pacific people have a higher prevalence of *H. pylori* infection when compared with NZ Europeans. *H. pylori* infection rates are 35% in Māori, 62% in Pasifika and 18% in NZ Europeans as well. Māori and Pasifika are also infected with a more carcinogenic strain. These ethnic differences in *H. pylori* are the predominant reason for the inequities that exist in gastric cancer rates and deaths between Māori and NZ European in Aotearoa. Identifying and treating *H. pylori* can prevent the development of stomach cancer. While patients with symptoms such as dyspepsia should be tested for *H. pylori*, infection is often asymptomatic. This highlights the importance of opportunistic testing of individuals at

elevated risk of infection. These risk factors include:

- Patient is in a high-risk population: Māori or Pasifika
- A family member has tested positive for *H. Pylori*

Gastroenterologist and researcher Dr Tom Mules is working with the Gut Cancer Foundation to highlight the importance of diagnosing and treating *H. Pylori* to reduce rates of stomach cancer. He highlights how easy it is to detect *H. pylori* using “a faecal sample, a test which can be requested by a GP. . He says that “the first-line treatment is usually triple therapy (clarithromycin, amoxicillin, and omeprazole). Importantly, *H. Pylori* can be resistant to antibiotics, so it is important to confirm that *H. pylori* has been killed by performing another faecal test 2 to 3 months after treatment. With a spotlight on this modifiable risk factor for stomach cancer, we could make a meaningful difference in reducing rates of stomach cancer in Māori and Pasifika.”

Liam Willis, Executive Officer says, “This Stomach Cancer Awareness Month, GCF is raising awareness of one of the drivers of inequities in stomach cancer for Māori and Pasifika. It’s important to raise awareness of the impact *Helicobacter Pylori* can have and also how simple it is to remove the risk.

I would also like to take this opportunity to impress upon all kiwis, the importance of listening to our bodies. Understand the difference between a little niggle, such as an upset stomach that passes quickly, and signs that something might be very wrong, such as persistent nausea or vomiting, or stool (poo) that is black or looks like coffee grounds, which indicates the presence of blood.”

To find out more about the campaign and how people can help raise awareness, head to www.gutcancer.org.nz/stomach-cancer-awareness-month/

Fact Sheet

- Stomach Cancer symptoms to look out for – when you should see your GP:
 - a painful or burning sensation in the abdomen
 - heartburn or indigestion (dyspepsia)
 - a sense of fullness, even after a small meal
 - nausea and/or vomiting
 - loss of appetite and/or weight loss

- swelling of the abdomen
 - unexplained tiredness or weakness
 - low iron levels, red blood count/ anaemia
 - blood in vomit
 - black-coloured stool
- If you are Māori or Pasifika or have a family member who has had *Helicobacter pylori* consider testing for *H. pylori*

 - Although incidence rates of stomach cancer are reducing globally, overall survival rates remain among the poorest for all cancers, with just 29 percent of patients surviving beyond five years after diagnosis.¹

 - The Cancer Control Agency State of the Nation Report identifies stomach cancer as one of the cancers with the highest disparity in both incidence and outcomes between Māori and non-Māori.
 - There are stubbornly high rates of stomach cancer in in Māori and Pasifika communities. While stomach cancer among Pākehā and Asian populations in New Zealand is declining, the overall rate of occurrence among Māori and Pacific peoples remains significantly higher (62 percent) than the population average (18 percent) – and three times greater than people of European ethnicity.
 - The two types of stomach adenocarcinomas account for around 95 percent of all stomach cancers: diffuse-type stomach cancer and intestinal-type stomach cancer. Of the two, diffuse-type stomach cancer, tends to be more aggressive, and Māori are among the few populations in the world for which diffuse-type is more common than intestinal-type. This is partly attributable to inherited *CDH1* genetic variants discovered in some whānau.

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For more information:

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¹ [https://teaho.govt.nz/static/reports/state-of-cancer-in-new-zealand-2020%20\(revised%20March%202021\).pdf](https://teaho.govt.nz/static/reports/state-of-cancer-in-new-zealand-2020%20(revised%20March%202021).pdf)

About the Gut Cancer Foundation

Gut cancer is the term for cancers of the digestive system, including the oesophagus, stomach, liver, gallbladder, bile ducts, pancreas and bowel. Each year, over 6000 New Zealanders are diagnosed with a gut cancer and half of these people will die within five years of diagnosis. It is collectively the most common form of cancer in New Zealand yet is rarely spoken of.

The Gut Cancer Foundation is committed to delivering an everlasting impact and positive change for all New Zealanders affected by gut cancers. We fund innovative research, are the voice of cancers of the digestive system, and provide vital information and education to improve and save the lives of all New Zealanders.

www.gutcancer.org.nz