



Position Statement on Stomach Cancer Screening (*H. Pylori*)

Position - We recommend that further research be conducted to understand the impact of *Helicobacter pylori* (*H. pylori*) in the development of stomach cancer, particularly for Māori. Specifically, we need further evidence to determine the prevalence of *H. pylori* infections and the associated risk factors.

We also need to understand other factors that lead to the development of stomach cancer, and the best way to manage *H. pylori* infection. Research in these areas will provide evidence to progress a national *H. Pylori* test-and-treat programme and an updated National Clinical Management Guideline for *H. Pylori* and Stomach Cancer.

Ngā take matua – main points

- The prevalence of *H. pylori* is higher for Māori compared to non-Māori
- Most people who have *H. pylori* will not know they have it
- Not everyone who has *H. pylori* will develop stomach cancer
- There is a link between *H. pylori* infection and stomach cancer
- Māori have a higher incidence rate of stomach cancer than non-Māori
- Early detection and treatment of *H. pylori* has the potential to reduce the incidence of stomach cancer, but more research is required around *H. pylori* prevalence
- Concurrent support strategies to address the social determinants of *H. pylori* prevalence is needed

Ko te aha te puku? Ki ō tātou tūpuna Māori, he mea nā ngā atua i hanga. Ko tana mahi, he nakunaku i te kai kua urutomo iho ki a ia, he kai ā-kiko, he kai ā-mātauranga hoki. Ki ētehi iwi, ko te puku te whare wānanga mō te hinengaro, me ngā kare ā-roto; te noho puku, te pukuaroha, te pukumahara, te pukumahi. Nā reira, e pakari ai, e kaha ai te tū o tēnei whare wānanga.

According to our tupuna, the puku was created by atua so that we could digest food, whether that be physical kai or mātauranga. To some iwi, the stomach is the whare wānanga for the mind and the organ that innately knows when we need to sit in silence, to sit with sympathy and cautiousness, and when we need to move. Ensuring our puku is healthy is important for our mind and our body.

***H. pylori* is linked to stomach cancer.**

H. pylori is carcinogenic¹ and is considered a major contributor to distal stomach cancers.²⁻⁴ *H. pylori* infection occurs when the *H. pylori* bacteria enters the stomach.⁵ This usually occurs during childhood.⁵ Most people do not know they have *H. pylori* bacteria in their stomach.

The prevalence of *H. pylori* is higher in Māori compared to non-Māori.

The prevalence of *H. pylori* in Aotearoa reflects what is found overseas – with indigenous and minority populations experiencing higher rates of infection.⁵ The prevalence of *H. pylori* infection is consistently higher for Māori (and Pasifika) compared to New Zealand Europeans.^{4,6} This can largely be attributed to particular social determinants of health, including housing and poverty.⁷ Māori and Pasifika are more likely to grow up in overcrowded homes, increasing the risk of transmission of *H. pylori* infection.^{7,8}

There is a higher incidence rate of stomach cancer in Māori.

In Aotearoa, Māori are around three times more likely to get stomach cancer⁹ and more likely to die once diagnosed compared to non-Māori.⁹⁻¹² In particular, Māori have higher rates of distal stomach cancers compared to non-Māori.¹²

Identifying and treating *H. pylori* has the potential to reduce the incidence of stomach cancer.

There is increasing focus on testing for, and treating *H. pylori* around the world.⁵ The World Health Organisation recommends all countries consider screening for *H. pylori* to prevent gastric cancer.¹³ Evidence suggests testing for, and treating *H. pylori* in the asymptomatic population, particularly those at higher risk of gastric cancers, can be effective in reducing the incidence of stomach cancer.¹⁴

More evidence is needed in Aotearoa to inform developments in screening for *H. pylori*.

Despite the positive findings of test and treat trials overseas, there is still much to be determined in Aotearoa regarding *H. pylori*, as well as stomach cancer.

Firstly, there are a number of other contributing risk factors to stomach cancers that still require further investigation in Aotearoa. These include the impact of tobacco smoking/exposure on stomach cancer incidence, obesity, dietary factors (high salt and processed meat intake, low fruit and vegetable intake), diabetes, alcohol consumption and whānau history.

Secondly, the risks of treatment of *H. pylori* infection in asymptomatic individuals needs further investigation. *H. pylori* infection is easily treatable with a combination of antibiotics and a proton pump inhibitor (PPI) medicine that lowers the amount of acid in the stomach.¹⁵ However, increasing *H. pylori* antibiotic resistance has been seen internationally for many years.¹⁶ This has also been seen in Aotearoa - however *H. pylori* antibiotic resistance has not been monitored locally since 2013.^{17,18} More recent evidence is required to inform developments in this area. Further, developing the evidence-base in Aotearoa for *H. pylori* and stomach cancers and its impact on Māori will strengthen the development of an equitably designed *H. pylori* testing programme.

Finally, more information is needed to determine the potential strategy for *H. pylori* testing and treatment. In addition to identifying target population(s), the method for testing and treating also needs to be carefully considered. International trials have used breath tests¹⁹, endoscopy^{20,21}, serology^{20,22} and ~~faecal~~ faecal antigen testing²³, with the latter being connected to a national bowel cancer screening programme.²⁴ In 2017, modelling to determine the cost of an Aotearoa test and treat programme for *H. pylori* in 25-69 year olds estimated that the greatest (cost-utility) benefits would be obtained from a serology test focussing on Māori.⁴

Any revision of a national test and treat programme will need to also include methods to address the social determinants of *H. pylori* prevalence, including overcrowding in homes and equitable access to the programme.

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