

COVID-19

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COVID-19 detection may be a flush away as N.W.T. begins testing wastewater

Program will collect samples of wastewater from Hay River, Yellowknife, Fort Smith, Fort Simpson, Inuvik

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It's possible testing wastewater for COVID-19 in N.W.T. could serve as an early warning system, the territory says. (Shutterstock / Bangkokker)

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A new way to detect COVID-19 within the territory will soon be possible thanks to human waste.

The N.W.T. government is getting ready to start regular surveillance of wastewater in some communities within the territory to identify the presence — or absence — of the coronavirus, according to a news release Thursday.

The program will collect samples of wastewater, or sewage, from Hay River, Yellowknife, Fort Smith, Inuvik and Fort Simpson and test it for COVID-19.

The territory expects these samples will cover about half of the N.W.T. population and it will cover 100 per cent of all the isolation centres in those communities.

Testing wastewater has been found to uncover trends of COVID-19 in the community four to 10 days earlier than clinical data would, the territory says, by detecting its presence in asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic populations.

While the possible presence of COVID-19 found in the sewage won't necessarily mean there's active transmission in the community, it's possible it will serve as an early warning system for the territory, the release states. It could also help the health and social services system target advice to communities as the pandemic continues.

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Initial samples have already begun to be collected in Yellowknife and Hay River. Implementation in the other three communities is set to begin in the coming weeks. The program is led by the territory's Office of the Chief Public Health Officer in partnership with Municipal and Community Affairs, and Environment and Natural Resources.

The program is also teamed up with the Public Health Agency of Canada's National Microbiology Laboratory, which is providing in-kind testing.

In a statement, Premier Caroline Cochrane said the territory is using every tool at its disposal to prepare for another surge in infections across the country.

"Establishing an early-warning system using wastewater samples will allow us to have a much better idea of whether COVID-19 is present in our territory, give communities advice and get people tested if they need it," Cochrane said.

\$100K from feds

Marc Miller, the federal minister of Indigenous services, also said in a statement that the program is essential to prevent as well as prepare and respond to any potential COVID-19 outbreak.

The territory says Indigenous Services Canada invested \$100,000 for the territory to purchase the testing equipment and to co-ordinate the delivery of the program. Equipment is expected to arrive in two to three weeks.

The territory says if there is a positive result, guidance and outreach will be targeted at those in the community who have arrived in the N.W.T. after travel from outside the territory since the last negative wastewater result, as well as those who have developed symptoms of COVID-19.

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The recommendation to get tested for COVID-19 and any other necessary advice will also be provided, and the strategy may evolve if community transmission develops, the release states.

The detection of COVID-19 in wastewater samples alone won't result in aggressive containment measures as it could be connected to imported travel cases being appropriately isolated, the release states. However, public health measures like limits on large-scale gatherings or mandatory masking in indoor public spaces may be considered.

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