

Health Canada tags Edmonton meningitis capital
By KEVIN CONNOR -- The Edmonton Sun

EDMONTON -- Edmonton is in the meningitis capital of the nation, according to Health Canada. The Capital Health Region's 50 cases of meningitis since December 1999 - three fatal - make an "outbreak" for an urban area the size of Edmonton's, said Theresa Tam, medical epidemiologist for Health Canada.

"Nationally the rate for meningitis is one per 100,000 people, so for a city like Edmonton you would expect to see maybe eight cases a year," Tam said. "Fifty is a much higher than usual number. That is about six cases per 100,000 people in a year when the national average was 0.7 per 100,000. That isn't a cluster of the disease - it's an outbreak."

Last November, Capital Health immunized 59,600 children and young adults with meningitis vaccines to try to curb the disease. "The campaign was because the numbers were so much higher than we would normally see," Tam said. Six meningitis cases per 100,000 people is cause for concern, said Dr. Vinod Dhawan, chief of infectious diseases at the Martin Luther King Jr. General Hospital in Los Angeles.

"That seems to be very high ... we haven't seem numbers like that in a while," Dhawan said. Although none of the Capital Health Region's cases were connected by a neighbourhood or school, the disease was being spread from person to person throughout the region, Tam said. "It was being spread around some way and it's not a bacterium that is spread easily."

In 1992 there were cluster outbreaks in Ottawa and Montreal that sparked vaccination campaigns, but the numbers weren't as bad as in Edmonton over the last year, Tam added. Dr. Gerry Predy, medical officer of health for the Capital Health Region, says he hopes we've seen the last of the outbreak here. "We had an unusual number of cases for many months and then the numbers dropped off in the summer and picked right back up again," Predy said. "We are hoping to see the end of it in the next few weeks."

Tests done on Edmonton's meningitis cases show there was a unique strain of meningitis being spread throughout the city, he said. "The organism circulating here was different than we have seen before. "The subtle genetic changes may have led to the situation we had last year." Local meningitis experts are conducting tests on the Edmonton strain of disease. "Meningitis is something we will never get rid of but hopefully the test result will be of value fighting the disease."