



Press Release
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Helicobacter pylori screening available at participating community pharmacies on Terceira Island

Starting March 4, residents of Terceira Island can undergo a free screening to diagnose infection by the *Helicobacter pylori* (Hp) bacterium. Early identification and treatment of infected individuals may contribute to the prevention of gastric cancer.

It is estimated that 65 to 80% of the Portuguese population carries Hp, a bacterium that represents a significant risk factor for stomach cancer. In a country where gastric cancer is among the most frequent and deadly, prevention plays a crucial role.

This program, explains João Macedo, member of the Prevention Working Group and Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Azores Oncology Center Prof. Dr. José Conde (COA), “aims to contribute to the prevention of gastric cancer through early identification and antibiotic treatment of individuals infected with *Helicobacter* on Terceira Island, as this bacterium is a proven major risk factor for gastric cancer, which has a high incidence in the region. This project was made possible through a partnership with several leading public institutions, including a consortium between COA, IPO Porto, and IPO Coimbra, which provided essential technical and financial support, as well as support from various private institutions and local partners who joined the initiative.”

Through collaboration among various health stakeholders, including regional pharmacies and diagnostic laboratories at the Hospital of Santo Espírito of Terceira Island, the goal is to test a complementary strategy to gastric cancer screening in Portugal, with a proximity-based approach. “The participation of pharmacies, which enjoy a privileged and trusted relationship with the community, contributes to project engagement through accessibility and convenience in screening access,” notes Teresa Almeida, member of the Prevention Working Group and the Board of the National Association of Pharmacies.

Vânia Fernandes, member of the Prevention Working Group and Secretary-General of the Association of Pharmacies of Portugal, also highlights the important role of pharmacies as key health locations and of community pharmacists in educating and raising awareness among the population. “Pharmacies are important allies in this free *Helicobacter pylori* screening program.

Community pharmacists are often the first health professionals patients turn to for clarification and play a key role in raising awareness about the importance of disease prevention,” she states.

Eligible for screening are healthy individuals over 18 years of age who are registered at regional health centers. The program will monitor the eligible population over time, with a planned duration of six months, assessing the feasibility of Hp diagnosis in a real-world context and promoting citizen health literacy.

According to José Dinis, Director of the National Strategy for Oncological Diseases, this initiative “is a coordinated response from civil society aligned with the National Strategy to Fight Cancer, whose early diagnosis pillar includes the implementation of new screenings, including gastric cancer screening. I believe this study will provide scientific knowledge from the Portuguese reality that is fundamentally important for implementing a population-based gastric cancer screening program in Portugal. Therefore, I consider the proposed study to be of undeniable public interest and deserving of support from the National Program for Oncological Diseases, by the Directorate-General of Health (DGS).”

Ultimately, the program aims to gather data to assess the potential impact on stomach cancer prevention and the scalability of the project. These results will be relevant in considering the possibility of expanding this screening program nationwide.

The initiative is called the Opportunistic Helicobacter pylori Screening Program (POHp) and results from the work of the Prevention Working Group of the National Cancer HUB, created by the Agency for Clinical Research and Biomedical Innovation (AICIB) and the Directorate-General of Health (DGS), in line with the National Cancer Fight Plan 2021–2030. Locally, it will be coordinated by COA, in collaboration with the National Association of Pharmacies and the Hospital of Santo Espírito of Terceira Island.

About the Prevention Working Group of the National Cancer HUB

The Prevention Working Group was established under the National Cancer HUB in June 2022 and is composed of healthcare professionals, patient association representatives, and researchers representing institutions such as IPO Coimbra, COA, the National Association of Pharmacies, the Association of Pharmacies of Portugal, Ipatimup, Fernando Pessoa University, Europacolon Portugal, among others.