

Assessment centre set to open as part of cancer study

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SYDNEY — An assessment centre will open here Thursday as part of the largest cancer study ever to take place in the country.

The centre, operated by Atlantic Partnership for Tomorrow's Health (Atlantic PATH), represents the first phase of a long-term study, said Elaine Collins of the new Sydney office. It will collect samples, personal, medical and employment histories from study participants.

It is the second assessment centre to be launched in Atlantic Canada — the first opened in Halifax in January. The Sydney centre will remain open until next spring, at which point centres will open in other Atlantic Canadian communities.

The goal is to attract at least 3,000 participants in Cape Breton, Collins said.

"It's an aggressive goal," she said, adding the Halifax centre reached the 3,000 participant level earlier this month. "We're really hoping the Cape Breton community comes out and supports this endeavour."

The study is part of the largest cancer research project ever undertaken in the country, said Dr. Louise Parker, the principal investigator. Nationally, they are looking for 300,000 participants over the next few years, including 30,000 in Atlantic Canada. The \$42-million study will follow the health of participants for up to 30 years to determine the roles lifestyle, genetics and environment play in cancer.

Anyone age 35-69 can volunteer to take part, whether they have had a history of cancer or not, and whether or not they are in good health generally, she said.

"We just want a huge cross-section of people in that age group," Parker said.

Sydney was chosen as home for the second assessment centre in this region because it is the next largest concentration of people in the province.

"It's really important for us that we get as many people as we possibly can through the assessment centre over the next few months," Parker said.

Participants are committing themselves to an initial two-hour session to provide information about their health and lifestyle and to provide samples of their blood, urine, saliva and toenail clippings. In the longer term, they will be asked to give permission for researchers to follow their health through cancer registries, hospitalization records and other databases, and possibly provide some further information or samples periodically in the future.

"In the long-term commitment, it should not be too onerous," Parker said. "Their participation now will really make a huge difference to our ability to understand why some people get cancer and why some people don't get cancer, in the future."

There is also a study within the study dealing specifically with arsenic, Parker said, because the Nova Scotia has higher naturally occurring levels of the mineral.

Atlantic Canada has the highest rate of cancer in the country. Each year, more than 13,400 people in the region are diagnosed and 6,300 die from cancer. The Cape Breton Regional Municipality has higher rates of cancer than the rest of Nova Scotia.

The Cape Breton Assessment Centre, located at 335 George St., will hold an official opening Thursday from 2:30-4:30 p.m. For more information or to schedule an appointment, visit www.atlanticpath.ca or call 1-877-285-7284.