
Research to prevent future pandemics

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What is the connection between parasitic infections and allergies?

“When it comes to allergies, there is a lot of research on hygiene issues and [microbiome](#) [9]. There is, however, little research on parasites,” says Professor Cecilie Svanes at the [Centre for International Health](#) [10] at the University of Bergen (UiB), when talking about a new project.

According to Svanes, German researchers have found antibodies suggesting that 10 to 20 percent of people participating in their studies have experienced parasitological infections.

“We seem to believe that parasites are rare in our part of the world. However, our children are quite often infected with small worms, and there are still occurrences of tapeworm,” says the researcher.

The project is called *Helminths and allergy in South Africa and Northern Europe* and covers research conducted in Norway, Estonia, South Africa, the United Kingdom and probably soon also Spain.

“Parasites are widespread in developing countries but not that common in the developed world,” says Svanes.

“While parasitic infections have become rarer in our part of the world, allergies have increased.”

Could develop into the next Ebola

[Helminths](#) [11] are large multicellular organisms, that are also commonly known as parasitic worms. Svanes believes that research into helminths is urgently needed.

“In the west, there has been a surge, almost an epidemic, of asthma and allergy. Now we see increasing asthma and allergy cases in the developing world. This could spell disaster,” says Svanes.

“Ebola could be like nothing compared to this. Just imagine, if you get 20 percent asthma or allergy sufferers in a society without the money for effective treatment. Ebola would be almost trivial compared to this. It would be disastrous if 20 per cent of children in a developing country were to develop asthma.”

A relevant global health approach

To underline her point, Svanes points to Estonia. A middle-income country, where there has been a marked increase in cases of asthma and allergy in the last few years. The professor believes that this could soon become reality in other countries experiencing rapid economic growth.

“It is essential to understand why allergies have increased in the west, and to try and prevent something similar from happening in the developing part of the world. Despite 30 years of research on asthma and allergies, we have still not found a solution to this major public health challenge,” she says.

Svanes believes that a closer inspection of parasites is a relevant approach in the current global health

environment.

“Parasites provide us with an opportunity to develop our immune system and may give us important answers as to how allergies develop. And this is precisely what we intend to study in the helminths research project.”

 [According to Professor Cecilie Svanes, the world is facing an epidemic of allergies and asthma. A UiB headed research project aims to look at the relationship between parasitic infections and allergies in children and families. The project has received seed funding from the Worldwide Universities Network \(WUN\). \(Illustration photo: Colourbox\)](#) [12]

 [Professor Cecilie Svanes, Centre for International Health, University of Bergen. \(Photo: UiB\)](#) [13]

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Fact box

Worldwide Universities Network (WUN)

- Professor Cecilie Svanes has been funded by the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN), of which UiB is a member.
- WUN is a leading global higher education and research network made up of 17 universities, spanning 10 countries on five continents.
- Once a year, the WUN Research Development Fund (RDF) awards seed funding to spark collaborative activities between researchers at the member universities.
- WUN focuses its research on four globally significant themes: Responding to Climate Change, Public Health, Understanding Cultures, and Global Higher Education and Research.
- The WUN RDF acts as a catalyst to apply for future funding for ambitious research projects from major funding bodies, e.g. the European Research Council (ERC).
- In recent years, UiB's researchers have increasingly discovered WUN RDF as a source to apply for seed funding. Last year Håvard Haarstad from the Department of Geography was awarded funding for a project to map climate and energy measures. Two years ago, Maurice Mittelmark of the HEMIL Centre was awarded with WUN funding for a global health promotion project and Reidar K. Lie of the Department of Philosophy got funding for the project Global Public Health Justice.

[For more information, visit the WUN home page.](#) [15]

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