

Poliomyelitis (Polio)- Factsheet

What is polio?

Poliomyelitis, or polio, is a serious illness caused by poliovirus damaging the nerves in the spinal cord that control the muscles. The affected muscle(s) suddenly become weak and limp, resulting in usually life-long paralysis of those muscles. Polio is very rare today thanks to widespread vaccination.

What are the symptoms of polio?

The most common symptoms of paralytic polio are sudden arm or leg weakness (especially the upper arm or upper leg, such as difficulty lifting the arm(s) above the head or lifting the knee(s)), and a loss of muscle tone and reflexes. This weakness progresses over 2-3 days and can be extremely dangerous if it affects the muscles that control breathing or the heart. If you or your child have any of these symptoms, seek medical care right away.

However, most people who are infected with poliovirus have either no symptoms, or mild symptoms such as a low-grade fever or sore throat. Less than 1% of people infected go on to develop paralysis. This means that if there is a person who gets paralysis from polio, there were likely other people with poliovirus around them who did not feel very sick themselves, but may still be spreading the virus.

How is polio spread?

Polio is spread when the virus enters the body through the mouth. The virus is found in the droplets from an infected person's nose and mouth for the first 1-2 weeks of their illness, and also in their stool (poop) for six weeks or more.

Who gets polio?

People of any age can get polio if they are not fully vaccinated and they come in contact with the virus. This can happen if they travel to a country where polio is still spreading, or if they come into contact with someone else who traveled and brought the virus to the United States.

What treatment is available for people with polio?

There is currently no treatment for polio, but many people with polio will have physical therapy and occupational therapy to try to help strengthen their weakened limb(s). This is most helpful when started early in the course of illness, but paralysis from polio is generally permanent. Mechanical ventilation may be necessary for people with paralysis of the muscles affecting their breathing.

Do infected people need to be kept home from school, work, or daycare?

People with polio will need to stay home from school, work, or daycare at the beginning of their illness, until they no longer test positive for the virus. This may take several weeks.

How can I protect myself and my family from getting polio?

Getting yourself and your family vaccinated against polio is the most important and effective way to prevent paralysis from polio. The only polio vaccine currently available in the United States is the inactivated polio vaccine (IPV), which is given in four doses. It can be given by

itself, or as part of a combination vaccine that contains other important childhood immunizations like pertussis, diphtheria, tetanus, hepatitis B, or Hib.