

Acute Flaccid Myelitis (AFM)

Frequently Asked Questions

What is acute flaccid myelitis (AFM)?

Acute flaccid myelitis (AFM) is a condition that affects the nervous system, specifically the spinal cord, which can cause the muscles and reflexes in the body not to work normally. It is a syndrome characterized by sudden onset of limb weakness. In many cases, distinctive lesions in the gray matter (nerve cells) of the spinal cord can be seen on magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). AFM can result from a variety of causes, including viral infections.

Who gets AFM?

Anyone can get AFM, but most cases reported are in children. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has not yet determined who is at higher risk for developing AFM, or the reasons why they may be at higher risk.

How do people get AFM?

A specific germ has not been commonly identified in laboratory testing among AFM cases. Therefore, it is not known why some people develop AFM and others don't. AFM can possibly be caused by a variety of viral infections, including poliovirus and other non-polio enteroviruses, flaviviruses (such as West Nile Virus), and adenoviruses. AFM is only one of a number of conditions that can result in neurologic illness with limb weakness. Such illnesses can result from a variety of different possible causes, such as viruses, toxins, and genetic disorders. Some of these are contagious between people and others are not. An individual diagnosed with AFM will often not know how they got it.

What are the symptoms of AFM?

Most patients with AFM will have sudden onset of weakness or paralysis of one or more limbs and loss of muscle tone and reflexes. Some patients may also experience:

- Facial droop/weakness
- Difficulty moving the eyes
- Drooping eyelids
- Difficulty with swallowing or slurred speech

Numbness or tingling is rare in patients with AFM, though some patients have pain in their arms or legs. Some patients with AFM may be unable to pass urine. The most severe symptom of AFM is respiratory failure that can happen when the muscles involved with breathing become weak. This can require urgent ventilator support.

How is AFM diagnosed?

AFM is diagnosed based on a combination of symptoms and diagnostic tests. MRIs can be very helpful in diagnosing cases of AFM. A doctor can tell the difference between AFM and other diseases with a careful examination of the nervous system, looking at the location of the weakness, muscle tone, and reflexes. CDC is working to determine diagnostic criteria that would easily distinguish AFM from other illnesses that cause limb weakness.

What is the treatment for AFM?

Since there is no known cause, there is no specific treatment for AFM. A neurologist may recommend certain treatments on a case-by-case basis. CDC has some guidance available for medical providers to help manage the care of patients with AFM.

How can AFM be prevented?

Being up-to-date on all recommended vaccinations, including polio vaccinations, and taking steps to prevent mosquito bites are some ways to protect against diseases that may cause AFM. CDC does not yet know the cause of the AFM cases, but it is always important to practice disease prevention steps. Hand washing and avoiding close contact with sick people are some things you and your children can do to protect against getting sick.

Where can I get more information?

- Your healthcare provider
- NJ Department of Health www.nj.gov/health/cd/topics/afm.shtml
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention www.cdc.gov/acute-flaccid-myelitis/index.html

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional. Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Revised 8/2017