

Poliomyelitis (Polio)



Frequently Asked Questions

What is polio?

Polio is a contagious disease caused by a virus that lives in the throat and digestive tract and invades the nervous system. Polio was one of the most dreaded childhood diseases of the 20th century in the United States. There were about 13,000 to 20,000 cases of paralytic polio reported each year in the United States before the Salk polio vaccine was introduced in 1955.

Who gets polio?

Though polio is no longer common in the United States, the disease still exists in large numbers in other parts of the world such as Nigeria, India, Pakistan, Niger, Afghanistan and Egypt. As long as the disease exists in the world, polio is a risk to everyone since it can be brought into the country through travel by a sick person from these regions. Therefore, the best way to ensure no new cases in this country and help other countries reduce their cases of polio is by vaccinating with the polio vaccine.

How do people get polio?

Polio virus is found in the stool of infected people. People become infected with polio by swallowing the virus. This can happen when infected people do not wash their hands properly after using the bathroom and then touch food or objects that may be placed in another person's mouth. In some cases the polio virus can be spread from contact with mouth or nose secretions from an infected person.

What are the symptoms of polio?

Up to 95% of people infected with polio will have no symptoms. About four to eight percent of infected people have minor symptoms which often go away completely such as:

- Fever
- Tiredness
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Abdominal pain
- Constipation
- Headache
- Sore throat

Another one percent will have additional symptoms of stiff neck, back and/or legs and will recover after two to 10 days. Less than one percent of polio cases result in permanent paralysis and/or muscle weakness of the limbs (usually the legs). Of those paralyzed, five to 10% die when the paralysis strikes the respiratory muscles.

How is polio diagnosed?

If a health care provider suspects polio, samples of the patient's stool or a swab from the throat of an infected person are taken and tested for the virus.

What is the treatment for polio?

Polio is caused by a virus not bacteria, so antibiotics are not useful in this situation. Most people recover completely on their own.

How can polio be prevented?

Polio is a vaccine preventable disease. The Inactivated Polio Vaccine (IPV) is the only polio vaccine offered in the United States. IPV does not cause polio or any other serious problems since it does not contain the live virus. The Oral Polio Vaccine (OPV) is no longer offered in the United States, but it is still offered around the world in regions where polio still exists.

Where can I get more information on polio?

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department
- NJ Department of Health www.nj.gov/health
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention www.cdc.gov/vaccines

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional.

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