

Fact Sheet

Polio

Also Known As: Infantile Paralysis



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What is Polio?



Polio, or poliomyelitis, is a crippling and potentially deadly infectious disease. It is caused by the poliovirus. The virus spreads from person to person and can invade an infected person's brain and spinal cord, causing paralysis (inability to move parts of the body).

How is it Spread?

Poliovirus only infects humans. It is very contagious and spreads through person-to-person contact. The virus lives in an infected person's throat and intestines. It enters the body through the mouth and spreads through contact with the feces of an infected person and, though less common, through droplets from a sneeze or cough.

An infected person may spread the virus to others immediately before and about 1 to 2 weeks after symptoms appear. The virus can live in an infected person's feces for many weeks. It can contaminate food and water in unsanitary conditions. People who don't have symptoms can still pass the virus to others and make them sick.

Signs and Symptoms

Some people (24 people out of 100) will have flu-like symptoms. Symptoms usually last 2 to 5 days then go away without treatment.

In rare cases, poliovirus infection can be very serious. About 1 out of 100 people will have weakness or paralysis in their arms, legs, or both. This paralysis or weakness can last a lifetime. The risk of lifelong paralysis is very serious. Even children who seem to fully recover can develop new muscle pain, weakness, or paralysis as adults, 30 or 40 years later. About 2 to 5 children out of 100 who have paralysis from polio die because the virus affects the muscles that help them breathe. Most people who get infected with poliovirus do not have any symptoms.

Doctors recommend that children get four doses of the polio vaccine (also called IPV) for best protection, one dose at each of the following ages:

- 2 months
- 4 months
- 6-18 months
- 4-6 years

Diagnosis

Doctors often recognize polio by symptoms, such as neck and back stiffness, abnormal reflexes, and difficulty swallowing and breathing. To confirm the diagnosis, a sample of throat secretions, stool or cerebrospinal fluid, a colorless fluid that surrounds the brain and spinal cord, is checked for the presence of poliovirus.

Treatment

Because no cure for polio exists, the focus is on increasing comfort, speeding recovery and preventing complications. Supportive treatments include:

- Bed rest
- Pain relievers
- Portable ventilators to assist breathing
- Moderate exercise (physical therapy) to prevent deformity and loss of muscle function
- A nutritious diet

Prevention

Polio vaccine protects children by preparing their bodies to fight the polio virus. Almost all children (99 children out of 100) who get all the recommended doses of vaccine will be protected from polio.



For more sources of information on this topic visit:

ST. CLAIR COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT www.scchealth.co

MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES www.michigan.gov/mdhhs

CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION www.cdc.gov

THE MAYO CLINIC www.mayoclinic.org