

Poliomyelitis (Polio)

Frequently Asked Questions

What is polio?

Polio, or poliomyelitis, is a very contagious (easily spread) disease caused by the poliovirus. In its most severe form, it causes nerve injury leading to paralysis (cannot move your body), difficulty breathing and sometimes death. There is no cure, but there are safe and effective vaccines to prevent polio.

Who gets polio?

Polio was eliminated in the United States (U.S.) in 1979. This means there has been no ongoing spread of the disease for more than 12 months since then. Though polio is no longer common in the U.S., the disease still exists in certain countries in Africa and Asia. As long as the disease exists in the world, polio is a risk to everyone. The best way to ensure no new cases occur in this country and help other countries reduce their cases of polio is by vaccinating with the polio vaccine.

How do people get polio?

Poliovirus is found in the feces (poop) 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. This type of spread is called the fecal-oral route. Poliovirus is highly infectious and is most transmissible up to 14 days before and after symptoms occur, but fecal shedding (having poliovirus in poop) can occur for weeks.

In some cases the poliovirus can be spread after someone sneezes or coughs. If you get droplets of an infected person's phlegm or mucus in your mouth or nose, you can become infected.

What are the symptoms of polio?

Most people with polio will not have any symptoms. About 25% will have flu-like symptoms that may include:

- Sore throat
- Fever
- Tiredness
- Nausea
- Headache
- Stomach pain

These symptoms usually last 2 to 5 days, then go away on their own.

The most severe symptom of poliovirus is paralysis (can't move parts of the body) or weakness in the arms, legs, or both. Less than one percent of polio cases result in paralysis, but it can lead to permanent disability and/or death.

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?

There is no “cure” for polio. Polio is caused by a virus not bacteria, so antibiotics are not useful in this situation. People infected with polio need supportive therapy, such as bed rest and fluids. 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 U.S. The 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 U.S., but it is still offered in other parts of the world. The OPV contains the live weakened virus. In some cases, the weakened virus can mutate (change) and people can shed the contagious virus in their feces for several weeks. These shed viruses can spread to other people and cause disease (this is called a vaccine-derived polio case).

The IPV also protects people against naturally occurring polioviruses and vaccine-derived polioviruses. Receiving all the recommended doses of vaccine is about 99% effective. As long as IPV coverage remains high, it is unlikely that any vaccine-derived poliovirus would become widespread in the U.S. since the OPV has not been used in the U.S. since 2000.

Any properly spaced combination of OPV (received before April 2016) or IPV doses, is considered a complete poliovirus vaccination series.

Who should receive the IPV vaccine?

Children should get four doses total, with one dose at each of the following ages:

- 2 months old,
- 4 months old,
- 6 through 18 months old, and
- 4 through 6 years old.

Most adults do not need to be vaccinated because they were likely vaccinated as children. However, adults who know or suspect that they are unvaccinated or incompletely vaccinated against polio should complete their polio vaccination series with IPV. Those traveling to countries where polio is common, should make sure they are up to date on their vaccines. For polio travel information, visit wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/diseases/poliomyelitis.

What are the side effects of IPV?

Some people who get the IPV get a sore spot where the shot was given. IPV has not been known to cause serious problems.

Where can I get more information on polio?

- Your healthcare provider
- Your local health department: localhealth.nj.gov
- NJ Department of Health: nj.gov/health
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: cdc.gov/vaccines/vpd/polio/

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