

Polio



Poliomyelitis (polio) is a highly infectious disease caused by a virus (the poliovirus). Polio itself cannot be cured once someone is infected. It invades the nervous system, and sometimes can cause total paralysis in a matter of hours.

Poliomyelitis is caused by the virus, poliovirus. Children under the age of five, those who have not been vaccinated, and immuno compromised adults (those with poor immune systems) are at higher risk.

The virus is transmitted by person-to-person contact, by contact with infected secretions from the nose or mouth, or by contact with infected faeces.

The virus enters through the mouth and nose, spreading throughout in the body. Incubation period (the time from being infected with the virus to developing symptoms of disease) ranges from five to 35 days (average seven to 14 days).

Diagnosis

Symptoms are not always obvious with polio infection. In 95 per cent of cases, there are no symptoms.

Mild symptoms may include:

- Slight fever.
- Headache.
- General discomfort or uneasiness (malaise).
- Sore throat.

Severe symptoms:

- Moderate fever.
- Headache.
- Vomiting.
- Diarrhoea.
- Excessive tiredness.
- Irritability.
- Pain or stiffness of the back, arms, legs and abdomen.
- Muscle tenderness and spasm in any area of the body.

Paralysis:

- Muscle weakness, asymmetrical (only on one side or worse on one side).
- Sensitivity to touch, mild touch may be painful.
- Constipation.
- Swallowing difficulty.
- Muscle contractions or muscle spasms, particularly in the calf, neck, or back.

Treatment

It cannot be predicted who will progress from mild polio to paralysis. Each case of polio needs to be managed separately.

There is no way to prevent the progression of the illness and management is aimed at controlling the symptoms and keeping the person alive by starting rehabilitation early.

There is no antiviral medication to treat polio. Treatment revolves around managing the symptoms. Polio cases are treated in hospital and careful measures are taken to prevent the spreading of infection.

- Pain killers are used to reduce headache, muscle pain, and spasms.
- Moist heat (heating pads, warm towels, etc.) may reduce muscle pain and spasm.
- Physical therapy with braces or corrective shoes, orthopaedic surgery, or similar interventions may eventually be necessary to maximise recovery of muscle strength and function.
- Lifesaving measures, particularly assistance with breathing, may be necessary in severe cases.

Vaccination

Polio vaccine is routinely given to all children. It should also be given if you are travelling to a polio area. It is given as mouth drops.