

Poliomyelitis/Polio

Fact Sheet



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What is poliomyelitis?

Poliomyelitis (polio) is an infectious disease caused by a virus that lives in the throat and gut. The virus invades the lymph nodes and the nervous system and may cause nerve damage and paralysis. Polio used to be very common in the U.S. and caused severe illness in thousands of people each year before polio vaccine was introduced in 1955. The last case of wild polio infection in the United States was in 1979.

How is polio spread?

Polio is spread from one person to another when there is contact with secretions of the throat of an infected person or contact with the stool of an infected person.

What are the signs and symptoms of polio?

Up to 95% of persons infected with polio will have no symptoms. A small number of infected persons have minor symptoms. These can include fever, fatigue, nausea, headache, flu-like symptoms, stiffness in the neck and back, and pain in the limbs which often resolves completely. Less than one percent of polio cases result in permanent paralysis of the limbs (usually the legs). Of those paralyzed, a small number die when the paralysis strikes the respiratory muscles. Paralysis can lead to permanent disability and death.

How will I know if I have a polio infection?

Due to routine childhood vaccination for polio, very few cases occur in developed countries. However, cases imported from countries that have not eliminated polio can occur. Health care providers suspecting polio may take swabs from the throat and stool samples to test for polio virus.

How is polio treated?

There is no drug treatment for polio infection, treatment is only supportive

How can I prevent polio?

Polio vaccine is given to children between the ages of two months to six years of age. Most adults have received polio vaccination or have had natural disease and recovered. Adults who work with polio virus, travel to countries with polio infection, or who care for those with polio infection may require vaccination.

Where can I get more information?

For more information on vaccination, contact your healthcare provider, local health center or contact the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention at www.mainepublichealth.gov or at 1-800-821-5821. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website <http://www.cdc.gov/polio/> is another excellent source of health information.