FACT SHEET: POLIOMYELITIS

May 2025

WHAT IS POLIOMYELITIS?

Poliomyelitis, commonly called polio, is a highly infectious viral disease caused by poliovirus (*Enterovirus*). Since polio immunization (vaccination) has become widespread, cases of polio are very rare in the United States.

WHO CAN GET POLIO?

An unvaccinated individual is more susceptible to polio, which is common in infants and young children, especially in unhygienic conditions. The risk of severe paralysis increases with age.

WHAT IS THE INCUBATION PERIOD OF POLIO?

The incubation period is typically 7-10 days but can range from 4-35 days.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF POLIO?

Most people infected with polio do not show any visible symptoms. The virus enters the body through the mouth and multiplies in the intestine. Only 1 in 4 people with the virus will experience flu-like symptoms, such as fever, fatigue, headache, vomiting, stiffness in the neck, and pain in the limbs. These symptoms usually last for 2-10 days, and most people recover completely. However, in a small percentage of cases, the virus can cause paralysis, usually in the legs, which may be permanent.

HOW IS POLIO SPREAD?

The poliovirus is mainly spread from person to person through fecal-oral and respiratory routes, or less commonly, through contaminated water or food. The virus can be present in oral secretions for several weeks and in feces for several months after infection, even in individuals with mild symptoms or no illness.

IS A PERSON WITH POLIO CONTAGIOUS?

Yes, a person with polio is contagious as long as the virus is present in feces and respiratory droplets (sneeze or cough). They are most contagious for several days before and after the onset of symptoms.

WHAT ARE THE COMPLICATIONS OF POLIO?

Paralysis can affect one or more limbs and, in severe cases, may lead to quadriplegia, respiratory failure, and, rarely, death.

HOW IS POLIO TREATED?

There is no specific treatment for poliovirus infection. People with polio need medical care to address potential complications of the disease and for rehabilitation.

IS THERE A VACCINE?

There are currently two types of polio vaccine available: Inactivated poliovirus vaccine (IPV [Silk Vaccine]) and oral poliovirus vaccine (OPV [Sabin vaccine]). Routine immunization using OPV in the United States has been discontinued to eliminate the risk of vaccine-associated paralytic poliomyelitis.

The polio vaccine (IPV)is a 4-dose series that should be administered to children at ages 2, 4, 6 through 18 months, and 4 through 6 years. The final dose in the IPV series should be administered at least 6 months after the previous dose. Adults who were born and raised in the United States can assume they were vaccinated for polio as children, unless there are specific reasons to believe they were not vaccinated, then those who are known or suspected to be unvaccinated or incompletely vaccinated should complete a 3-dose primary series.

CAN POLIO BE PREVENTED?

The best way to prevent polio is through immunization. Since 2000, only the inactivated virus injectable vaccine has been available in the U.S.

WANT MORE INFORMATION?

Information about poliomyelitis and other related health topics can be found cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please visit dchealth.dc.gov or call (202) 442-5

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