



## Durham Region Health Department **Facts about...**



# Polio

## What is it?

Polio (short for poliomyelitis) is caused by a virus that attacks the nervous system and can destroy the nerve cells in muscles leading to permanent paralysis of the muscles used for breathing, eating and walking. It can also cause death. Canada was certified polio-free in 1994, and Ontario has had no cases of polio since that time. Polio continues to exist in some countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan.

## How is it spread?

- Polio virus is found in the throat and stool of infected individuals.
- Polio is usually spread through contact with the stool of an infected person.
- Polio can also be spread through droplets when an infected person sneezes or coughs.
- Less often it is spread by sharing contaminated food or drinks with an infected person.
- Poor personal hygiene, especially after using the washroom, can spread the polio virus from the stool of an infected person to the mouth of another person.
- Infected persons are most contagious from a few days before to a few days after the start of symptoms but the infection can spread as long as the virus is in the throat or stool.
- The polio virus can live in an infected person's stool for many weeks.

## What do I look for?

Most polio infections (90-95%) have no symptoms or very mild symptoms that can go unrecognized. In people with symptoms, it can include fever, headache, sore throat, feeling tired, nausea and stomach pain.

With more severe disease, severe muscle pain and stiffness of the neck or back can occur. Paralysis may also occur. Paralysis is usually on one side and occurs 7 to 14 days after infection. Weakness or paralysis that continues past 60 days is usually permanent. Paralysis occurs in less than 1% of cases. Paralysis of the respiratory or swallowing muscles can be life threatening.

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905-668-2020 or 1-800-841-2729 | [durham.ca/health](http://durham.ca/health)

If you require this information in an accessible format, contact 1-800-841-2729.



# How is it treated?

There are no medications that cure polio or relieve paralysis.

Supportive treatments (rest, fluids and physiotherapy) help relieve the muscle pain during the acute illness and prevent complications caused by muscle paralysis. Ventilators help those with respiratory paralysis to breathe. Long-term care and rehabilitation can help the person cope with permanent disability.

# How can I protect myself?

- Polio is best prevented by vaccination.
- See 'Facts About... Diphtheria, Pertussis, Tetanus, Polio & Haemophilus Influenzae B Vaccines and Polio Vaccine'.
- Keep up to date with vaccinations and speak to your health care provider about your need for other vaccines.
- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water or use hand sanitizer when hands are not visibly dirty.
- Use good personal hygiene, especially thorough washing of hands after using the toilet and before eating or preparing food.
- Cough or sneeze into your elbow and encourage others to do the same.
- Wash your hands after handling nose and throat secretions (i.e., after disposal of facial tissues containing nose and throat discharges).
- Do not share water bottles, straws, eating utensils, cigarettes, toothbrushes, toys or anything else that has been in contact with saliva, nose or throat secretions.
- If you are ill, stay at home and isolate yourself from others.

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