



Hawaii State Department of Health

Disease Investigation Branch

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Poliomyelitis

(infantile paralysis, polio)

What is polio?

Polio is a disease caused by a virus that can damage the nervous system (brain, spinal column and nerves) and may cause paralysis and death. After the use of polio vaccines began in the United States in the 1950's, the number of polio cases has fallen to just a few cases a year. However, polio remains a problem in many areas of the world.

How is it spread?

Polio is very contagious. The poliovirus is found in the stool of an infected person and can be spread from person to person if good hand washing habits are not followed. Polio can be spread, rarely, by eating foods contaminated with stools of infected persons.

What are the symptoms of polio?

Most people with polio either have no symptoms, or may have a fever only. In addition to fever, others may have headache, vomiting, muscle pain, and stiff neck and back. Paralysis occurs in less than 1% of polio infections. The paralysis is usually one-sided and affects the legs more than the arms. Paralysis of the breathing or swallowing muscles can be life threatening.

When do symptoms start?

The symptoms usually begin 7 to 14 days after exposure to the virus, but they may start from 3 to 35 days. Persons with polio are most contagious from a few days before, to a few days after the start of symptoms. However, persons infected with polio can spread the infection for as long as the virus stays in their throats or stools.

What is the treatment for polio?

There is no specific treatment for polio, but it is important that a polio patient receive medical care, especially during the early part of the illness to prevent further problems from the disease.

Is there a vaccine for polio?

Yes. In the United States, the first three doses of inactivated poliovirus vaccine (IPV) are recommended to be given at 2, 4 and 6 to 18 months, with a booster given at age 4-6 years.

Routine vaccination of adults who reside in the United States is not necessary or recommended because most adults are already immune and have a very small risk of exposure to poliovirus in the US. Adults who plan to travel to areas where polio is still common should talk to their doctor about getting an IPV booster before traveling.

Can a person get polio from the vaccine?

Vaccine-associated paralytic polio (VAPP) is a rare bad reaction to the live oral polio vaccine that was formerly given in the United States. This form of the polio vaccine is no longer licensed for use and has not been available in here since 2000. There is no risk of VAPP with IPV.

How do you keep from getting it?

The best way to keep from getting polio is to make sure you and your children get their shots on time.

For more information, see the CDC's website at <http://www.cdc.gov/polio/>