

Information on Polio and Polio Vaccination

What is polio?

Polio is a highly contagious viral disease. It can cause lasting paralysis (lameness, palsy) of the arms or legs. It may also affect the muscles needed for breathing, thereby causing death.

In the past, polio was present all over the world. Following global vaccination campaigns, the disease was eradicated from most countries. Syria achieved polio-free status in 1999. However, recently (in October 2013), new polio cases were detected in Syria for the first time since then.

What are the signs and symptoms of polio?

From a few days up to several weeks after contact with the polio virus, only unspecific signs of illness may occur, mostly flu-like symptoms (fever, nausea, sore throat, headache). These may be followed by meningitis, stiff neck, back pain, muscle aches, and paralysis. However, most people infected with polio virus do not fall ill at all. Such people can still pass the virus on to others. Therefore they unknowingly contribute to the spread of polio virus. Examination of a stool sample shows whether someone is shedding polio virus.

How can polio be transmitted from one person to another?

Polio virus is shed in the stool. It is mostly spread through the faecal-oral route, meaning that virus is passed from one person to another through a chain of contacts. For example, someone shedding the virus may touch the handle of the toilet door before washing hands. Another person could then pick up the virus from the door handle.

The virus may also spread by so-called droplet infection, meaning that it is released into the air when someone sneezes or coughs. Subsequently, it may be inhaled by someone else.

For how long can the virus be transmitted to others?

As long as a person is shedding the poliovirus, they can pass it on to others. Shedding may last for several weeks. Even someone without any signs or symptoms may shed the virus. To prevent transmission to others, such people should avoid close contact with unvaccinated persons. Repeated stool tests can show when a person stops shedding the virus.

How can I protect myself?

Vaccination is the best way of protecting yourself against polio. Polio vaccination is recommended for all infants, children, adolescents and adults. A series of 3-4 vaccinations (depending on a person's age and type of vaccine used) is needed to achieve full protection. Anyone who already received a complete vaccination series needs only one booster shot. The vaccine used in Germany is given by injection (=jab). It contains killed viruses and cannot cause paralysis.

You should get any vaccine doses you have missed as soon as possible. Have your vaccination status checked by a doctor. Bring all vaccination cards or similar documents you may have.

Wash your hands with soap and water after using the toilet, but also after changing nappies (diapers). Avoid being sneezed or coughed at by others. When you have to sneeze or cough yourself, use a tissue or sneeze into the crook of your arm. Teach your children to do so as well.

Protect yourself and your children! Get vaccinated!