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What is polio?

Polio is a disease caused by poliovirus. The disease may affect the central nervous system. It can cause paralysis and even death.

Who gets polio?

Persons who do not receive the polio vaccine and are exposed to the virus are the most susceptible to developing the disease. Since polio vaccination has become widespread, cases of polio are very rare with the last case of naturally occurring polio in the United States being reported in 1979. Polio persists in some developing countries, and travelers to these countries should be fully immunized.

What are the symptoms of polio?

There is a wide range of disease presentations. The vast majority of people who are infected with the poliovirus don't become sick and have mild symptoms only, such as fever, malaise, headache, nausea and vomiting. Others experience severe muscle pain and stiffness in the neck and back. In the rare but most severe cases, paralysis and even death may occur.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

The time from being exposed to getting sick can range from 3-35 days. Symptoms usually appear 7-14 days after exposure for paralytic cases.

How is polio spread?

Polio usually is spread from person to person primarily through the fecal-oral route. The virus is transmitted from the feces (stool) of an infected person to the mouth of another person from contaminated hands, food, water or contaminated objects. It is also spread through droplets from an infected person's throat from a sneeze or cough.

How long can an infected person carry polio?

Patients are most infectious from 7-10 days before and after the onset of symptoms. Patients, however, are potentially contagious as long as the virus is present in the throat and feces. The virus persists in the throat for approximately one week after the onset of illness and is excreted in the feces for several weeks, or occasionally, months.

What is the treatment for polio?

There is no specific treatment for polio. Supportive care can be given to help relieve symptoms.

How can polio be prevented?

Vaccination protects people against polio. The inactivated polio vaccine (IPV) is used currently in the United States. All children should be vaccinated starting at approximately 2 months of age. Multiple doses are required to ensure protection. Contact your physician or local health department for further information about vaccination.

How can I learn more about polio?

- If you have concerns about polio, contact your healthcare provider.
- Call your local health department. A directory of local health departments is located at the VDH Local Health Districts page.
- Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at the CDC page on polio.

October 2018

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