

Polio - symptoms in later years

Poliomyelitis is a viral infection that can lead to paralysis of the arms, legs or the diaphragm (which controls breathing). Further symptoms – including new weakness, joint and muscle pain and fatigue – can occur years after the initial bout of poliomyelitis.

These symptoms are known as 'late effects of polio' or 'post-polio syndrome'. Not everyone who has had polio will develop late effects. People who were severely paralysed by polio are more commonly affected. Approximately 20 to 40 per cent of people who had acute paralysis due to polio will develop late effects.

Symptoms of polio

Late effects of polio can develop years or decades after the initial bout. The most common symptoms include:

- Decreasing strength and endurance
- Breathing, swallowing or speaking difficulties
- Pain in muscles and joints
- Fatigue and an inability to stay alert.

Late effects are not caused by a new polio infection

Late effects are not caused by re-infection with the poliovirus. Scientists believe that post-polio syndrome could develop in the following way:

- Nerve cells that control muscle movements were damaged by the initial polio infection.
- Some of the nerve cells recovered, while others 'sprouted'. The nerve cells that 'sprouted' took over the work of cells that had died and so have worked a lot harder than a 'normal' nerve cell.
- After many years of an increased workload, the 'sprouts' start to break down.
- As a result, new muscle weakness is experienced.

Diagnosis of polio

There is no test that will definitely show if you have late effects of polio. Diagnosis is based on a person's medical history. A person with late effects will have:

- Had polio in the past, with or without paralysis
- New symptoms of pain and weakness
- No other clinical explanations for your symptoms.

Treatment for polio

There is no specific treatment for post polio syndrome. Symptoms may be controlled or improved if you:

- Avoid physical overexertion or stress
- Keep comfortably warm and avoid exposure to cold temperatures
- Modify daily activities to conserve energy; for example, sit rather than stand at a workbench
- Use callipers, braces, walking sticks and electric scooters

- Ensure that all exercise is pain free and non-fatiguing.

Help from health professionals

After a full assessment with a rehabilitation specialist, you may be referred to:

- A physiotherapist, if you have weakness, pain or mobility problems
- A respiratory therapist, if you are having trouble breathing
- An orthotist, if you need a brace on your leg
- An occupational therapist, if you have trouble functioning at work, at home or in the community
- A speech pathologist, if you have trouble speaking or swallowing
- A pain clinic, if you have chronic pain
- A psychologist, if you have depression or an affected mood.

Weight control is important

As people with late effects of polio cannot do vigorous exercise, many become overweight. Dietary advice from a dietitian is desirable.

Surgery is sometimes required

Surgery can relieve a number of problems, such as:

- A torn rotator cuff tendon in the shoulder – this can occur after years of using the arms to push up and out of wheelchairs
- Foot deformities that can cause falls.

Help with the emotional effects

The onset of the late effects of polio can cause many patients to relive the nightmare of past polio experiences. Joining a support group may help.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Rehabilitation specialist, for assessment and possible referral
- PolioNetwork Victoria (a service of Independence Australia) Tel. (03) 9418 0411 or 1300 704 456

Things to remember

- The late effects of polio cause muscle weakness and fatigue years after a bout of polio.
- It is important to avoid physical overexertion if you have late effects of polio.
- Braces, walking sticks and electric scooters can help relieve the symptoms of the late effects of polio.

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Polio Services Victoria

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