

# No more POLIO by 2005



## Introduction

In the past 50 years one of the major causes of disability in children in South Africa was poliomyelitis (usually called polio). The last confirmed polio case in South Africa was in 1989.

Polio is preventable by immunisation. All children in South Africa should be routinely immunised against polio, to prevent the disability. Immunisations will not be very successful in reducing cases of polio unless an active programme to identify and investigate all suspected polio cases is in place.

## What causes Polio?

Polio is caused by very small germs called polioviruses, which cannot be seen with the naked eye. These germs are shed (excreted) in the stool (faeces) of infected persons. The germs are usually passed from person to person through contaminated hands and food or in situations of poor sanitation.

These germs then enter the body and attack the person's nerves, causing weakness (or paralysis) of the leg and/or arm, and if severe may involve respiratory or breathing muscles.

The affected part may not recover and the person is left paralysed for the rest of his/her life. If the illness is severe, the person can die.

## What is Polio?

Polio is sudden weakness / paralysis of the leg(s) and/ or arm(s) and/or other parts of the body. This paralysis should not have been present at birth. If the person was injured just before the paralysis or the person has a history of being mentally retarded, then polio is not likely to be the cause of the paralysis.

Any cases of sudden weakness or paralysis in a child under the age of 15 years and which cannot be explained by any of the above reasons should be reported to the nearest health facility for investigation. A laboratory test has to be done on the stools of the patient to prove whether or not the cause of the weakness is due to polio. The test must be done within two weeks of the start of the weakness.

## What should be done if Polio is suspected?

If any child has difficulty in standing / walking / if a baby suddenly has a floppy leg / or any new case(s) of sudden weakness in children under 15 years of age, should be reported to the nearest health facility. They will take two stool samples from the patient(s) and send it to the laboratory for testing. Polio spreads very rapidly in a community. Should polio be the cause, all children in contact with the confirmed case will be immunised.

## Can Polio be treated?

Once paralysis has occurred it cannot be reversed. However, health workers can help the patient by ensuring that no serious deformities develop, and arrange for rehabilitation.

## Can Polio be prevented?

Polio can be prevented by immunisation. Immunisation is free at all hospitals and clinics.

All children should be immunised at birth, 6, 10 and 14 weeks. Further doses should be given at 18 months and 5 years of age. It is essential that a child receive all doses early in life, for full protection. One or two doses will not provide full protection.

The role of health care workers, parents & the community?

The success that has been seen so far in the fight against polio could not have occurred without the active participation of health care workers, parents and the community. With the active cooperation of parents and the community, most children are now immunised against polio.

The challenge is now to maintain immunisation coverage at a high level and look out for all those cases of suspected polio (AFP).

Parents and the community can help by:

- Ø Ensuring that all children are immunised against polio at the recommended age. It is the duty of every parent to ensure that his or her child / children receive this protection against polio.
- Ø If you know of children who are not immunised against polio then you should urge their parents or guardians to take them for immunisation.
- Ø Reporting all cases of sudden paralysis in children under the age of 15 years to the nearest health facility.



## Remember.....

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- Ø Polio can be prevented by immunisation.
- Ø All children must be immunised with the polio vaccine at birth, 6, 10 and 14 weeks, 18 months and at 5 years.
- Ø Immunisation services are free for all children in SA.
- Ø All children under the age of 15 years who develops sudden paralysis should be reported to the nearest health facility immediately.
- Ø Your help is needed – you can make the difference!



We can only have our children protected from the disease by immunisation. Immunisation is the most precious gift that parents and health care workers can give to children.