

POLIO – GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

The long battle against polio finally ended with the development of the first effective polio vaccine by Dr. Jonas Salk in 1952. In 1955 the first polio vaccinations were administered. By 1979 almost everyone in the United States had been vaccinated. Since then only ten people in the United States have been diagnosed with the disease.

However polio continues to affect older adults who were stricken with the disease earlier in their lives before the development of polio vaccines. Even if they experienced only mild polio-related disabilities they may discover that their bout with the disease continues as they age. Estimates from the National Center for Health Statistics indicate that more than 440,000 polio survivors are at risk for developing post-polio syndrome as they grow older.

SYMPTOMS OF POST-POLIO SYNDROME

The exact causes of post-polio syndrome are poorly understood. However research suggests that it may be the result of the slow degeneration of nerve cells and muscle fibers that were damaged by the polio virus.

This debilitating disease causes a variety of incapacitating symptoms:

- muscle wasting, pain, weakness and loss of function
- chronic fatigue
- joint pain, degeneration and deformity
- swallowing and respiratory disorders
- poor circulation
- respiratory disorders
- sensitivity to cold
- sleep apnea
- falls
- osteoporosis
- malnutrition

Although there is no cure for post-polio syndrome a variety of lifestyle changes can improve the quality of life for people with the disorder.

DIAGNOSING POST-POLIO SYNDROME

If your parent has a history of polio and is beginning to experience post-polio symptoms, schedule an appointment with his or her physician. There are other diseases that may cause similar symptoms so your relative's doctor may refer her to a specialist in diagnosing and treating neuromuscular disorders.

Before the appointment help your parent gather information about his overall medical history and specifics about polio and post-polio symptoms:

- When were you diagnosed with polio?
- How severe was the disease?
- What parts of your body were affected?
- What treatments did you receive?

- When did you notice post-polio symptoms?

The doctor will schedule a variety of tests including magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), computerized tomography (CT), and blood tests to confirm a diagnosis of post-polio syndrome and rule out other muscle or nerve disorders with similar symptoms...

MANAGING POST-POLIO SYMPTOMS

Currently there are no treatments or cures available for post-polio syndrome. However a variety of home remedies and lifestyle changes can help your parent improve his overall health, well-being and quality of life.

Some suggestions:

- Avoid fatigue. Schedule moderate physical activity and rest periods during the day. Use a cane or walker, stick to light housekeeping or gardening chores.
- Ask your parent's doctor for a referral to a physical therapist. He or she can help your family member create a regimen of moderate exercise including short walks, swimming or water aerobics, stretching routines that will improve his overall fitness and prevent weight gain.
- Prevent falls by installing grab bars in the bathroom near the toilet and shower, and handrails on both sides of the stairway. Make sure lighting is good and install nightlights at the top and bottom of stairs. Use rubber-backed rugs or bathmats to prevent falls.
- A few sessions with a speech therapist can help your parent manage swallowing difficulties.
- Avoid being around smokers.
- Keep the house at a comfortable temperature, dress in layers and have a sweater on hand if your parent feels chilly. Cold increases muscle fatigue.
- Make sure your relative gets annual flu and pneumonia vaccines.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about post-polio syndrome contact the Post-Polio Health International website at www.post-polio.org. The site offers information about post-polio syndrome health care professionals, support groups, local clinics and professional associations. Post-Polio Health International's mission is to enhance the lives and independence of polio survivors and home ventilator users through education, advocacy, research and networking.

CAREGIVING & POLIO

Thanks to the development of effective, inexpensive vaccines, polio has been eliminated in the United States and most of the rest of the world. However a significant number of older adults who developed the disease before vaccines became available now suffer with the aftereffects of their earlier bout with polio. Understanding this disease and its long-term effects on older adults will make it possible for family caregivers to help maintain their relative's overall health and wellbeing as they grow older. [740/4/10]