NSW Health

Polio vaccine

Parent Information Sheet

The Australian Government makes some vaccines free under the National Immunisation Program (NIP).

Q. What is polio?

Polio is a viral infection that can cause paralysis and death. Most people with polio have no symptoms. About 10% may have fever, headache, tiredness, nausea, and vomiting, but they usually recover.

In about 2% of cases, the virus causes severe muscle pain and stiffness in the back or neck. Less than 1% develop paralysis, which can affect the arms, legs, neck, or breathing muscles.

Q. How does polio spread?

Polio spreads through contact with tiny amounts of faeces or saliva from an infected person. This can happen if hands are not washed properly.

The virus enters through the nose or mouth, infects the gut, and can spread to the blood and nervous system. People with polio are most contagious 10 days before symptoms until 10 days after symptoms appear.

Q. How do vaccines work?

Vaccines help the immune system fight infections. If a vaccinated person is exposed to the virus, their body can fight the illness better or make it less severe.

Q. How effective is the polio vaccine?

A full course of the polio vaccine (3 doses) is 99% effective at preventing the disease.

Q. Who should get the vaccine?

Adolescents who have not had all 3 doses of the polio vaccine should be vaccinated.

Q. Who should not get the vaccine?

Do not give the vaccine to people who:

- had a severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) to a previous dose
- had a severe allergic reaction to an ingredient in the vaccine.

Q. What is anaphylaxis?

Anaphylaxis is a very rare but severe allergic reaction. It can cause unconsciousness or death if not treated quickly. Immunisation providers are trained to manage anaphylaxis.

Q. What if I don't know if my child has had the polio vaccine?

If you don't have records, your child can still be safely vaccinated.

Q. What is in the polio vaccine?

The vaccine contains small amounts of:

- phenoxyethanol, formaldehyde, and polysorbate 80
- neomycin, streptomycin, and polymyxin B
- bovine serum albumin.

These ingredients help the vaccine work or preserve it. It was also exposed to bovine-derived materials during manufacturing.

Q. How safe are vaccines?

Vaccines in Australia are very safe. They must pass strict safety checks before approval by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA). The TGA also monitors vaccine safety after use.

Q. What are the side effects of the polio vaccine?

Side effects are usually mild and may include:

- redness, pain, or swelling where the shot was given
- fever.

Serious side effects are extremely rare.

For more information, check the Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) at health.nsw.gov.au/schoolvaccination. If you are concerned about side effects, contact your GP.