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## **POLIO AND ITS LATE EFFECTS**

*Information for  
Attendant Carers*

# What is Polio?

Polio is a virus which has the potential to paralyse people.

People living in Australia can receive vaccination against polio. If all people were vaccinated it would mean our country would be free of new cases. Before you travel overseas, you should always check with your doctor that your immunisation against polio is up to date.

Polio is a virus which grows and develops in the gut. Like other gastro-enteric illnesses, it is spread by poor hygiene such as not washing your hands after being to the toilet, before preparing food or drinks. It is also spread through contaminated sewage, or coughing or spitting which can spread saliva onto another person.

The illness is like the flu. Symptoms may be headache, fever, aching muscles, stomach upsets, a sore throat and pain. Sometimes the sick person can develop meningitis, an inflammation of the brain, as well.

The virus attacks the nerve cells which take messages from the brain to the muscles via the spinal cord. When nerve cells are killed or damaged by the poliovirus, the muscle cells are unable to move. That is what causes paralysis.

The sick person is only infectious for one to three weeks.

Not everyone who has the virus is paralysed. Some people who are weakened by the virus appear to have fully recovered. Others are so affected by the virus that they need wheelchairs, attendant care and even artificial assistance to breathe.

## Post-polio Syndrome

The people you may be asked to assist will have had polio many years ago and are not infectious.

They are use to being as independent and busy as possible. Some will have developed a new set of symptoms or problems which are affecting their lives. Your client may have one or more of the following problems:

- *new muscle weakness*
- *pain*
- *breathing difficulties*
- *severe fatigue*
- *lack of endurance*
- *choking or swallowing difficulties*
- *indigestion*
- *inability to tolerate cold temperatures*
- *stress*

People who had polio tried very hard to recover and to be as independent as possible. They have tried to do the same things as their families and friends and in doing so they may have overused certain muscles and joints.

Coping with new symptoms on top of old disabilities is very stressful. You might find your client seems fearful, anxious or depressed. Remember that she or he may be going through a difficult time of change.

## What an attendant carer can do?

- A. Listen to your client as she or he may have worked out the best ways of doing things to reduce fatigue.
- B. Access more information which is available from the ParaQuad Polio Community Officer, the ParaQuad library or the internet.

## Useful sites

- [www.paraquad.asn.au](http://www.paraquad.asn.au)
- [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au)
- [www.satlink.com.au/~ddloyd/intro.html](http://www.satlink.com.au/~ddloyd/intro.html)
- [www.psv.svhm.org.au](http://www.psv.svhm.org.au)
- [www.britishpolio.org/aboutus.html](http://www.britishpolio.org/aboutus.html)