
Polio: survivors of past epidemics face late effects

Key points:

- October is Polio Awareness Month, and the theme this year is "Past Pandemic Survivors"
- The COVID-19 pandemic is not the first major disease outbreak that many Australians have lived through
- People who survived polio often have later effects including muscle weakness, fatigue and breathing problems
- Polio's late effects may even impact those who had mild symptoms or didn't know they contracted the virus
- Information and resources are available through Polio Australia and state networks

October is Polio Awareness Month. Polio Australia, along with the state polio networks, is seeking to raise awareness of the issues facing many survivors of polio in Australia even today. Our theme for this year is "Past Pandemic Survivors" (PPS), highlighting two major points: polio survivors have lived through epidemic-induced isolation before, and Post-Polio Syndrome (PPS, known under the umbrella term Late Effects of Polio), affects thousands of Australians today. To find out more about the Late Effects of and Polio Awareness Month, go to www.polioaustralia.org.au or contact us on 03 9016 7678.

With the ongoing COVID-19 situation, many Australians are experiencing major disease outbreaks for the first time. With this comes isolation, school closures and restricted movement, and the fear of contracting or passing on a deadly and highly-contagious disease. However, many people who were alive in Australia in the middle of last century are no strangers to large-scale outbreaks, or the fear and uncertainty that come with them.

Polio, often known as infantile paralysis, was one of the most-feared diseases of the twentieth century. It swept the country for 40 years, in epidemics that saw thousands of Australian children hospitalised or placed into quarantine. And its effects were cruelly arbitrary, bringing permanent paralysis or even death to some children, committing some to months or years in an iron lung, and leaving others relatively unscathed.

Decades later, many who lived through these outbreaks – even those who had a mild case of polio at the time, or were perhaps unaware that they had been infected – experience a cluster of symptoms known as Late Effects of Polio. Symptoms can include debilitating fatigue, muscle weakness and pain, sleep disturbances, cold intolerance, breathing difficulty, voice fatigue, and swallowing disorders. While it's most common for symptoms to arise in people who had a more severe illness at the time of infection, we now know that anyone who contracted the virus is at some risk.

Those who survived exposure to the viral disease are mostly older now, and are again seeking help from medical and health professionals. But getting the right help isn't always easy. Lack of awareness of polio's late effects among the health professional community is a very real frustration for many polio survivors. Still others are unaware themselves that their symptoms are related to childhood exposure to polio.

Gillian Thomas, Polio Australia's president and a survivor of polio herself, says: "For many ageing polio survivors, the re-emergence of symptoms, known as the Late Effects of Polio, can be quite debilitating, and the lack of knowledge of post-polio issues among health professionals can be really frustrating. Polio Australia's resources provide vital

Media Release

21 September 2020 – for immediate release



information to fill those knowledge gaps, both for health professionals and the survivors themselves.”

Polio Australia provides education on the Late Effects of Polio across the country, for both health professionals and survivors of polio. During the restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we are hosting a variety of virtual sessions – see our website for details. For membership with your state body, contact us or go to www.polioaustralia.org.au/support-and-services for local contact details.

Media contact:

Steph Cantrill
Community Programs Manager
03 9016 7678
steph@polioaustralia.org.au