

What is polio?

Poliomyelitis, or polio for short, is a highly infectious **viral disease** that affects men, women, and children of all ages and ethnicities. Polio does tend to affect children more than adults, attacking the body's nervous system. There are three different strains of polio (Types 1, 2 and 3); the disease can lead to muscle paralysis and death in individuals infected by the virus.

How is the polio virus spread?

Polio is spread through person-to-person contact by fecal-oral route, by direct contact with an infected person or by contamination of water, food and hands. The virus can remain alive in the environment for long periods of time and is therefore, considered a very infectious disease.

The polio epidemic in Canada

During the 1930s, '40s, '50s, North America was devastated by the polio epidemic which caused death and disability in thousands of Canadian families. Thankfully, due in large part to the fundraising efforts by March of Dimes, Dr. Jonas Salk developed the first polio vaccine, which first became available to Canadians in 1955. Currently, there are two forms of vaccination: IPV (inactivated poliovirus containing dead virus and given by injection) vaccine was introduced in 1955 and the OPV (trivalent oral poliovirus vaccine containing live, weakened virus) in 1962.



Canada has been polio-free since 1994, largely due to the large immunization efforts of Health Canada, Pan American Health Organization and the World Health Organization. The last major polio epidemic in Canada was 1959 where over 1887 cases resulted in paralysis with over 190,000 poliovirus infections reported.¹

Polio vaccination is part of standardized immunization procedures in Canada, and is available to all Canadians.

March of Dimes and the polio epidemic

Ontario March of Dimes was founded in 1951 to raise funds to eradicate the threat of polio in Canada. It takes its name from one of the best-known fundraising drives in Canadian history – the March of Dimes to end polio.

The Marching Mothers founded our door-to-door campaign, and with the help of this funding, the Salk vaccine was discovered within three years. Desperate to find a cure for polio, mothers across Canada joined a North America-wide fundraising drive towards research. Women canvassed their neighbours carrying pickle jars or canvassing kits. Home welcoming Marching Mothers® turned on their porch lights to signal their support.



Over the years, this simple, community-based process raised millions of dollars for polio research and rehabilitation. Long after the polio vaccine's discovery, women and men continued the annual marches.

With the threat of polio greatly diminished, the March of Dimes in Canada began funding centres for people who had already contracted the disease, and the early programs focused mostly on rehabilitation and job training. The organization continues to serve polio survivors and families through its program Post-Polio Canada®.

By the early 1960s, the organization had grown, with its mandate shifting considerably to serve the broader needs of all adults with physical disabilities, and in Ontario the legal name was changed to the Rehabilitation Foundation for the Disabled.

Today, March of Dimes is dedicated to "creating a society inclusive of people with physical disabilities."ⁱⁱ

ⁱ Public Health Agency of Canada – www.phac-aspc.gc.ca

ⁱⁱ History of March of Dimes – www.marchofdimes.ca