

Grandparents: Polio Could be Just an Airplane Flight Away

Are you old enough to remember polio epidemics in North America? Did you have a childhood friend who had polio? Please give your children the gift of your memories. Today some parents believe that there can be serious adverse effects from routine childhood vaccinations and therefore choose to bypass the polio vaccine. They often know nothing about polio because they thought it was eradicated by the Salk vaccine when they were children. With the recent appearance of a variant of smallpox, and new cases of polio in an unvaccinated community, we have learned that avoidance of vaccinations can be very risky.

Tell your adult children about the disaster of polio: it is painful and frightening, it kills the nerves that make muscles work – sometimes even the ones that enable breathing. Have you ever seen an iron lung? Can you imagine your grandchild living in one? Polio can, in a flash, rob children and young adults of their mobility – no more running, jumping, dancing – maybe no more walking, or perhaps struggling to walk with braces and crutches for the rest of your grandchild's life. When parents decline the polio vaccine, it is more likely that a new polio epidemic will occur. The wild polio virus can enter Canada with a visitor from a country where polio is still endemic because vaccination is not yet universal. Polio can then affect families here because, when parents do not allow vaccination, the program is no longer universal here either.

Polio hit me in 1949, seven years before the Salk vaccine was available. It was severe and I was totally paralyzed – I could move no part of my body below my neck. Polio caused four months in hospital, a year away from school, six years of regular physiotherapy, financial disaster for my parents, emotional devastation for my entire family, leg braces, crutches, an awkward, rigid back brace all through high school, every summer devoted to another surgical effort to make walking and my misshapen spine more stable. It was not much of an adolescence, but I was relatively lucky in my recovery, maybe because I had been a strong and athletic kid and I received good medical care. My hospital roommate never got back on her feet. Today, most doctors have never seen a case of acute polio; learning about the disease and its treatment would have to start from scratch.

I managed to make up the year of school I had missed and when I attended university I walked with just a cane and without braces. Happy end of story? No. Thirty-five years after my initial illness (age 46, a family, a challenging career) the effects of polio hit again: extreme fatigue, loss of stamina, and insidiously increasing muscle weakness. As my remaining overworked motor nerves wear out, there has been a lot of muscle pain, early arthritis, more rib and spinal deformity, guaranteed osteoporosis, and unwanted premature retirement. This is post-polio syndrome. Twenty years later, the succession of losses continues and is unstoppable. Soon I will no longer be independent because my arms are weakening. I will not be able to support myself to walk or stand up, or even to reach for things in front of me. Otherwise, I am healthy and a young 69.

This is what polio could do to your unvaccinated grandchildren. Please talk with their parents about it!

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