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Acute Flaccid Myelitis: A Dangerous Polio-like Illness

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Staff Piece

In our constant news feeds about the latest celebrity diet and the next political statement, a headline that could affect more people than usual might have slipped past you concerning Acute Flaccid Myelitis (AMF). It has been called a “polio-like illness” due to the damage it causes to the muscles and spinal cord. This disease affects the grey matter, which is the darker tissue in the brain and spinal cord consisting mainly of nerve cells, and causes the muscles to become weak, and reflexes in the body to become slow. While it can affect a person of any age, the outbreak has mainly affected children. According to the [CDC](#), the cases in children “began to surge in 22 states with 127 cases being investigated and 62 cases confirmed” as of October 2018. For example, in the state of Minnesota, and those with similar climates, there are usually no cases or up to 1 case of AFM per year in each state. As of December 2018, there had been 10 confirmed cases and about 130 more cases under review. While this past year has seen a recent surge in cases, the CDC says that there has been a steady increase in cases since 2014 across the United States.

The symptoms of AFM include facial drooping, weakness, trouble moving the eyes, drooping eyelids, trouble swallowing and breathing, and slurred speech. These symptoms, along with a lack of information on the subject have made it difficult for doctors to properly diagnose people with this illness. Because of the lack of research in the past, the need for answers has never been more pressing. Because the symptoms that AMF causes are present in various other diseases, the one thing that doctors can do is treat those individual symptoms. While treating the symptoms is helpful, it does not help the overarching disease that is occurring in the spinal cord and respiratory system.

One of the few known facts about AFM is that its cause could be either environmental toxins or viruses such as poliovirus, enterovirus A71, and West Nile virus. At the end of 2018 there was still very little known about this disease, and doctors and researchers were still looking for more information about treatment options. As of the beginning of 2019 it has been confirmed that this disease is a respiratory virus that is causing the grey

matter to become infected in the spinal cord, which can lead to worsened conditions within hours, including paralysis.

While more information is uncovered, initiatives can be taken to help those that have been affected and prevention measures can be investigated. Because AMF has been linked to a respiratory virus and possibly environmental toxins, places such as the [Cleveland Clinic](#) have compiled a list of preventative measures that can be taken. Be sure to get vaccinated, especially for the Polio virus, try to steer clear of mosquitoes, wash your hands, be careful around others who are sick, and don't share things such as straws, cups, or utensils. These measures can also be followed by people who have been affected so as to prevent further infection. With more and more research coming out every month, a way to help those affected may be closer than we think.

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