

World Polio Day - October 24

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Late Effects of Polio: This can be quite debilitating, according to Gillian Thomas, Polio Australia's president and a survivor of polio herself.

World Polio Day on October 24 is celebrated for good reason.

Every year, we honour the incredible achievements of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, reducing cases of this highly contagious illness by 99.9 per cent since global efforts began in 1988.

And this year we have even more to celebrate, with Nigeria being officially declared polio-free in September.

While Pakistan and Afghanistan are now the only two countries endemic for wild poliovirus, it's important to also acknowledge that the fight isn't over.

Polio anywhere is a threat to people everywhere, and we're grateful that the work of the End Polio Now campaign continues.

But there's another part of the story that thousands of people could tell you: polio may have been eradicated in Australia several decades ago, but it's far from over.

While the fear, isolation and threat of infection with COVID-19 are new experiences for some of us this year, many Australians are no strangers to major disease outbreaks.

Polio swept the country for 40 years, in epidemics that saw thousands of 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.

Survivors of polio in Australia are in two major cohorts - those who contracted polio in the local epidemics and are now ageing, and those who have migrated here from countries where the virus was active more recently.

Many have lived with physical disability since the initial infection, while others experience disability only when they get older and experience polio's late effects.

Either way, getting the right help and support isn't always easy. Lack of awareness of polio and its late effects among health professionals and within the service community is a very real frustration for many people.

Others are unaware 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 Late Effects of Polio, can be quite debilitating, and the lack of knowledge of post-polio issues among health professionals can be frustrating.

"Polio Australia's resources provide vital 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, they are hosting a variety of virtual sessions - see polioaustralia.org.au/polio-awareness-month or call (03) 9016 7678 for details.

Polio NSW provides localised support and information - call (02) 9890 0946 or visit polionsw.org.au

<https://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/6978375/polio-australia-polio-is-far-from-over/?cs=20096>