

Polio is not the 'days gone by' disease it's often thought to be

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Polio in America is history. Or is it?

In the 1950s polio was the most feared disease in America. Today, parents of young children are often unaware of what polio actually is — a contagious disease caused by a virus and spread by oral contact. It attacks the nervous system and can result in paralysis any place in the body.



(ENLARGE)

Marie Latta, a polio survivor and proud grandmother, lives in Sandy Springs.



Family photo

At Christmas 1949, Marie Latta was home from the hospital but using a nasal feeding tube. Her older brother died of polio.

The year 2007 is designated by Congress as the "Year of Polio Awareness" in an effort to spread the word that the vaccination is still needed.

The goal of worldwide eradication has not been achieved because small pockets in Africa and India have refused the free vaccine. In addition, polio has spread to previously polio-free countries.

The recent TB [tuberculosis] scare caused when a [Georgia] man with TB traveled internationally captured America's attention. A similar incident could occur if someone with polio traveled here from a Third World country.

In the past two years, five cases of polio have been reported in Minnesota children who were not vaccinated and an Arizona adult who was not vaccinated. Ask anyone over 60 about polio epidemics. There was no vaccine and no cure.

People remember the fear of this killer that no one understood. Before the Salk vaccine in the 1950s, polio was unstoppable. With Dr. Jonas Salk's discovery, America became a mass polio vaccination clinic.

My family participated in the fall 1949 epidemic. In early September, my chills, fever, sore throat and aching were relentless. When I couldn't swallow even ice cream, our doctor made a house call. On my arrival at the University of Michigan Hospital, I had an emergency tracheotomy. Soon afterward, I had a nasal feeding tube placed. It felt the size of a garden hose. Our new pastor was called in to be with my parents when I died.

Instead, death sneaked down the hall and took my older brother. He and my younger brother were admitted with polio within days after me. I turned 8 in the hospital. My older brother was 9 and my younger brother was 6.

My limbs were not paralyzed, but I could not breathe or swallow on my own. I was in the hospital until two days before Christmas, when I went home with my feeding tube, which I used for a year. My younger brother and I recovered and led active lives. In the 1950s, Americans thought the vaccine had put polio behind us.

But in the 1980s, as survivors were reaching middle age, our bodies began to feel the residual effects of long overuse of damaged muscles. The condition was labeled post-polio syndrome.

As a result of these late effects, in 1993 I had to choose between breathing and walking. This began my journey in a wheelchair. And on Mother's Day 2006, I had surgery for a tracheostomy and a feeding tube, both permanent. In the past year I have been busy finding my new normal.

The small chance of contracting polio is not worth the risk of not vaccinating. The consequences are severe and permanent.