

Acute Flaccid Myelitis (AFM) Fact Sheet



Acute flaccid myelitis (AFM) is a condition that affects the nervous system, specifically the spinal cord, causing weakness in one or more limbs. Practicing good hygiene is one way to protect yourself and your family from diseases that can cause AFM.

What are the symptoms of AFM?

Most patients will have sudden onset of limb weakness and loss of muscle tone and reflexes. Some patients may also experience

- facial droop/weakness,
- difficulty moving the eyes,
- drooping eyelids, or
- difficulty with swallowing or slurred speech.

Rare symptoms include numbness or tingling in the limbs and being unable to pass urine. In rare cases, a patient may have difficulty breathing due to muscle weakness and require urgent ventilator support.

If you or your child develops any of these symptoms, you should seek medical care right away.

How is AFM diagnosed?

A doctor can tell the difference between AFM and other diseases with a careful examination of the nervous system and the spinal cord, looking at the location of the weakness, muscle tone, and reflexes. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), lab testing of the cerebrospinal fluid, and checking nerve conduction and response can be very helpful in diagnosing cases of AFM.

What causes AFM?

Certain viruses are known to cause AFM including enteroviruses, such as [poliovirus](#) and [enterovirus A71 \(EV-A71\)](#), and [West Nile virus](#). Since 2014, most of the patients with AFM (more than 90%) had a mild respiratory illness or fever consistent with a viral infection before they developed AFM. All the stool specimens from AFM patients that we received tested negative for poliovirus. Most patients had onset of AFM between August and October, with increases in AFM cases every two years since 2014. At this same time of year, many viruses commonly circulate, including enteroviruses, and may be temporally associated with AFM.

Respiratory illnesses and fever from viral infections are common, especially in children, and most people recover. We are continuing to investigate possible causes of AFM, and why a small number of people go from having a mild respiratory illness or fever to developing AFM.

How is AFM treated?

There is no specific treatment for AFM, but a doctor who specializes in treating brain and spinal cord illnesses (neurologist) may recommend certain interventions on a case-by-case basis. For example, neurologists may recommend physical or occupational therapy to help with arm or leg weakness caused by AFM. CDC is working closely with national experts to better understand how to treat AFM. CDC and national experts are also working to understand the long-term outcomes (prognosis) of people with AFM.

How can I prevent AFM?

Because we don't know the cause or trigger for AFM, there is no specific action to take to prevent AFM. However, for some cases of AFM we have found a cause; certain enteroviruses, such as EV-A71, and West Nile virus can cause AFM.

- You can protect yourself and your children from poliovirus by getting vaccinated. Polio vaccine contains inactivated (not live) virus, and protects against poliovirus. This vaccine does not protect against other viruses that may cause AFM.
- You can protect against bites from mosquitoes, which can carry West Nile virus, by using mosquito repellent, staying indoors at dusk and dawn (when bites are more common), and removing standing or stagnant water near your home (where mosquitoes can breed).
- You can protect yourself and others from enteroviruses by [washing your hands often](#) with soap and water, avoiding close contact with people who are sick, and cleaning and disinfecting frequently touched surfaces.

For more information on acute flaccid myelitis, visit www.cdc.gov/acute-flaccid-myelitis.