

Acute Flaccid Myelitis (AFM) Fact Sheet



Acute flaccid myelitis (AFM) is a condition that affects the nervous system, specifically the spinal cord, which can result from a variety of causes. 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?

AFM can be caused by a variety of germs, including several viruses:

- enteroviruses (polio and non-polio),
- West Nile virus (WNV) and viruses in the same family as WNV, specifically Japanese encephalitis virus and Saint Louis encephalitis virus, and
- adenoviruses.

Environmental toxins and genetic disorders may also cause AFM. AFM is only one of a number of conditions that can result in neurologic illness with limb weakness. Oftentimes, however, a cause for AFM cannot be identified.

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.

How can I prevent AFM?

Being up to date on all recommended vaccinations, including poliovirus, is one way to protect yourself and your family from diseases that can cause AFM. Check with your doctor to make sure your family is up to date on all recommended vaccines.

You can protect yourself from mosquito-borne viruses such as West Nile virus—another known cause of AFM— by using mosquito repellent and staying indoors at dusk and dawn, which is the prime period that mosquitoes bite. Remove standing or stagnant water from nearby property to minimize the number of mosquitoes.

While we don't know if it is effective in preventing AFM, you can—

- wash your hands often with soap and water,
- avoid close contact with sick people, and
- clean surfaces with a disinfectant, especially surfaces that a sick person has touched.

Washing your hands the right way is one of the best things you and your children can do to protect against getting sick. Wash your hands often, and especially—

- before you touch food;
- after going to the bathroom, blowing your nose, changing a baby's diaper, or touching an animal, an animal's food, urine or feces; and
- before and after taking care of a sick person or a cut or wound.

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