

Frequently asked questions (FAQs)

FAQs for travellers from polio-infected countries

Why has the WHO Director-General made these recommendations for travellers and why now?

- In January 2014, governments of many countries expressed concern about the international spread of polio and requested the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) to convene an Emergency Committee under the International Health Regulations (IHR).
- This committee of experts, after careful deliberation, made a recommendation to the Director-General that the recent international spread of polio in the traditionally low season of polio transmission should be considered and dealt with as an “extraordinary event”. If unchecked, this type of international spread could expand rapidly during the high poliovirus transmission season, posing a public health risk to other countries requiring internationally coordinated public health action.
- The current situation stands in stark contrast to the near cessation of international spread during 2012 and the low polio season of 2013. The Committee expressed the opinion that to fail now, when humanity is within reach of creating a polio-free world for all children, forever, would be a tragedy.
- The Director-General accepted the Committee’s assessment, declaring, on 5 May 2014, the international spread of wild poliovirus a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). The Director-General also issued a set of Temporary Recommendations under the IHR (2005) to address the PHEIC.

How do the new recommendations for international travel protect me?

- Each and every dose of polio vaccine received builds immunity against the virus and helps stop its spread to vulnerable populations, especially children. Even if you have been fully vaccinated, the protection you received may have diminished over time. Vaccination can protect you from infection by poliovirus and will prevent the spread of virus from you to others.
- Since travellers are potential carriers of poliovirus between countries, by getting vaccinated before international travel, travellers also have the power to protect children in other countries from the crippling effects of polio, by reducing the possibility that they might transiently carry the virus if they were exposed.

Before I travel what do I need to do?

- All residents of polio-exporting countries, and visitors who have been living in such countries for more than four weeks, should receive a dose of either oral polio vaccine (OPV) or inactivated polio vaccine (IPV) between four weeks and 12 months prior to international travel.
- Travellers from polio-exporting countries should have their vaccination status recorded in a WHO/IHR “yellow booklet” International Certificate of Vaccination or Prophylaxis, available to download at http://www.who.int/ihr/ports_airports/icvp/en/

- Residents and long-term visitors from other polio-infected countries are also encouraged to receive a dose of polio vaccine at least four weeks and not more than 12 months before international travel, and to obtain an appropriate certificate as proof of vaccination.
- Individuals from polio-free countries who are planning to travel and stay in a polio-infected country for more than four weeks should consider receiving a dose of polio vaccine before departing their home country as proof of such vaccination may be required when they seek to leave the polio-infected country to return home.

How long before I travel do I need to be vaccinated?

- Ideally, international travellers from all polio-infected countries should receive a dose of polio vaccine between four weeks and 12 months before departure.

What if I have to leave suddenly for an overseas trip?

- Those undertaking urgent travel are advised to make arrangements to receive an additional dose at least by the time of departure. Even if given late, polio vaccine will provide some benefit for the individual and in reducing the risk of international spread.

How will authorities know that I have been vaccinated? What documentation will they need?

- Travellers from polio-exporting countries should ensure they receive a stamped and signed WHO/IHR “yellow booklet” International Certificate of Vaccination or Prophylaxis following vaccination which will act as proof of vaccination; the booklet can be downloaded at http://www.who.int/ihr/ports_airports/icvp/en/
- Travellers from other polio-infected countries should also have their polio vaccination recorded in an appropriate document.

What if I am not carrying proof of polio vaccination? Will I still be allowed to enter the country I am travelling to?

- Some countries already have polio vaccination requirements for entry (e.g. the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, India), and others may decide to put additional measures in place to prevent the spread of poliovirus. Please check with the local consulate of the country to which you are travelling.
- However, there are no WHO Temporary Recommendations for polio-free countries.

Does it matter whether I am vaccinated using oral polio vaccine (OPV) or inactivated polio vaccine (IPV)?

- No, both forms of the vaccine are acceptable.

Where can I get vaccinated?

- Please check with your local doctor, local health authority, or national Ministry of Health.

Travellers from which countries are affected?

- The updated and current list of ‘currently polio exporting’ and ‘currently polio infected’ countries can be found at <http://polioeradication.org/Infectedcountries/PolioEmergency.aspx>

If I have already been vaccinated, do I need to receive an additional dose, or can I simply provide blood test results showing the presence of polio antibodies?

- If your last dose of polio vaccine was more than 12 months before your expected date of travel, and you are living in a polio-exporting country, you must receive an additional dose of polio vaccine between four weeks and 12 months prior to your departure for any international travel. This is essential to boost the immunity in your intestines which is needed to stop the spread of poliovirus to vulnerable populations, especially children. Even the presence of polio antibodies in a blood test does not necessarily guarantee ‘intestinal immunity’.

At what stage do I have to present proof of vaccination – while applying for a visa, at the airport before flying or on arrival?

- Under these WHO Temporary Recommendations, the governments of all polio-exporting countries should ensure that all residents and long-term visitors receive a dose of polio vaccine, and a certificate of their vaccination status, prior to international travel.
- Please note that some countries (e.g. the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, India) have specific polio vaccination requirements for travellers from infected countries. Other countries may separately decide to put additional measures in place to prevent the spread of poliovirus. Please check with the local consulate of the country to which you are travelling.

Do these travel recommendations apply only to the citizens of polio-infected countries, or to foreigners living and/or working there as well?

- These WHO Temporary Recommendations apply to citizens and any visitor who spends more than four weeks in a polio-infected country.

What are the consequences for travellers from polio-infected countries who attempt to travel internationally without proof of vaccination?

- Ensuring that travellers leaving countries that are currently exporting wild poliovirus are vaccinated is vital to protecting people in other countries from polio.

- Although the current WHO Temporary Recommendations do not recommend that polio-free countries screen arriving passengers for their polio vaccination status, some individual polio-free countries require proof of such vaccination for a visa or for entry. It is important to ensure you know the requirements of the country to which you are travelling, please check with the relevant consulate.

Is there any group of people who should not receive oral polio vaccine (OPV)?

- All travellers, regardless of age, should receive vaccine.
- Pregnant women should be vaccinated as there is no evidence that OPV or IPV is unsafe for pregnant women and their unborn children.
- Patients with severely depressed immune function can be safely vaccinated with inactivated polio vaccine (IPV). OPV should not be given to patients whose immune system is severely depressed because of known underlying diseases such as certain primary immunodeficiencies, or to patients on medications which severely depress the body's immune system.

Why should adults receive a dose of vaccine?

- Polio vaccination recommendations for travellers from polio-infected countries apply to adults as well as children. This is based on evidence that older individuals play an important role in the international spread of poliovirus, including documented cases of adult travellers excreting wild poliovirus.

What should I do if my doctor thinks I should not be vaccinated with OPV for medical reasons?

- There are very few valid and internationally-accepted contraindications for vaccination with OPV.
- If your doctor thinks that you should not be vaccinated with OPV on medical grounds, vaccination with IPV is an alternative.
- If IPV is not available, you should ask your physician to provide you with a written opinion, however, please note that there are very few valid and internationally-accepted contraindications for vaccination with OPV and this may not be accepted.

How does polio spread?

- Polio is spread through faecal-oral transmission and person-to-person contact. When a child is infected with wild poliovirus, the virus enters the body through the mouth and multiplies in the intestine. It is then shed into the environment through the faeces where it can spread rapidly through a community, especially in situations of poor hygiene and sanitation. If a sufficient number of children are fully immunized against polio, the virus is unable to find susceptible children to infect, and dies out.
- Young children who are not yet toilet-trained are a ready source of transmission, regardless of their environment. Polio can be spread when food or drink is contaminated by faeces. There is also evidence that flies can passively transfer poliovirus from faeces to food.

- Most people infected with poliovirus have no signs of illness and are never aware they have been infected. These symptomless people carry the virus in their intestines and can “silently” spread the infection to thousands of others before the first case of polio paralysis emerges.
- For this reason, WHO considers a single confirmed case of polio paralysis to be evidence of an epidemic – particularly in countries where very few cases occur.

FAQs for travellers from polio-free countries

Are there any recommendations for travellers from polio-free countries to polio-infected areas?

- Yes, WHO recommends, per its document ‘International Travel and Health’, that before travelling to areas with active poliovirus transmission, travellers from polio-free countries should ensure that they have completed the age-appropriate polio vaccine series, according to their respective national immunization schedule. Adult travellers to polio-infected areas who have previously received three or more doses of OPV or IPV should also be given another one-time booster dose of polio vaccine. Travellers to polio-infected areas who have not received any polio vaccine previously should complete a primary schedule of polio vaccination before departure. For more information, please visit <http://www.who.int/ith/en/>
- In terms of the Temporary Recommendations issued by the Director-General of WHO on 5 May 2014 that address the Public Health Emergency of International Concern (or PHEIC), travellers from polio-free countries are only affected if they have been living in a polio-infected country for more than four weeks.
- Long-term visitors to polio-exporting and polio-infected countries are subject to the same WHO Temporary Recommendations as local residents: i.e., you should ensure you will have received a dose of polio vaccine, and proof of vaccination, at least four weeks to 12 months prior to your departure from the polio-affected country. You may be vaccinated either in your home country or in the country you will be visiting.