

Beat: News

Mysterious polio-like illness afflicts more than 20 children in California

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USPA News - A rare infection that causes symptoms of polio has been found in around two dozen young children in California since late 2012, health officials said on Monday, highlighting the possibility of an emerging infectious polio-like syndrome. Researchers began looking into the disease after observing a cluster of polio-like cases at their medical centers in California.

A review of all polio-like cases among children who had biological samples referred to California's Neurologic and Surveillance Testing program revealed a total of between 20 and 25 suspected cases between August 2012 and July 2013. A case report on five of the victims shows they experienced paralysis of one or more arms or legs that came on suddenly and reached the height of its severity within two days of onset. Three of the children had a respiratory illness before the symptoms began, but all of the children had previously been vaccinated against poliovirus. The children were treated with steroids, IVIG and/or plasma exchange but their symptoms did not improve and they still had poor limb function after six months. Two of the five children tested positive for enterovirus-68, a rare virus previously associated with polio-like symptoms. No cause was identified in the other three children. "Although poliovirus has been eradicated from most of the globe, other viruses can also injure the spine, leading to a polio-like syndrome," said Dr. Keith Van Haren of Stanford University. "In the past decade, newly identified strains of enterovirus have been linked to polio-like outbreaks among children in Asia and Australia. These five new cases highlight the possibility of an emerging infectious polio-like syndrome in California." While searching for similar cases in California, the researchers included cases when children suffered paralysis affecting one or more limbs and had abnormal MRI scans of the spinal cord that explained the paralysis. They did not include children who met criteria for Guillain-Barré syndrome and botulism, which can cause similar symptoms. Dr. Carol Glaser, leader of a California Department of Public Health team investigating the illnesses, told the Los Angeles Times that the polio-like illness may be caused by a virus and urged doctors to report cases of acute paralysis. But she added that nothing has been found so far that raises public health concerns. "Our findings have important implications for disease surveillance, testing and treatment," said Van Haren. "We would like to stress that this syndrome appears to be very, very rare. Any time a parent sees symptoms of paralysis in a child, the child should be seen by a doctor right away." Poliovirus has been eradicated in the United States for more than 30 years, as well as most of the globe. Only Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria and Syria have not yet been declared free of the disease. Cases of poliovirus were reported in northeast Syria last year, making it the country's first outbreak in more than a decade. Polio mainly affects children under 5 years of age, and there is no treatment available to stop the progression of the disease or reverse the bodily damage. Vaccination is the only means to prevent it. Only approximately 1 percent of all polio victims develop acute flaccid paralysis (AFP).

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Editorial program service of General News Agency:

UPA United Press Agency LTD

483 Green Lanes
UK, London N13NV 4BS
contact (at) unitedpressagency.com
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