

Now and then: As world waits for COVID-19 vaccine, a look back on the age of polio

Polio was eliminated in our country decades ago, but those who lived through it remember it vividly



4/16/1955 -- Dr. William S. Burgoyne gives a shot of the Salk anti-polio vaccine to Michael Urnezis, 6, while the boy's sister, Joanne, 12, a polio victim, looks on April 16.

If you have anyone in your life who's old enough to remember, there was a time, in the first half of the 20th century, that might draw comparisons to life today. There was fear, uncertainty and lots of concern for public health.

It wasn't the novel coronavirus, of course, the current pandemic sweeping the globe. It was an epidemic called paralytic poliomyelitis, or infantile paralysis -- perhaps best known as polio.

In fact, polio was once one of the most feared diseases in the U.S., according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which goes on to say online](#) that in the early 1950s, before polio vaccines were available, polio outbreaks caused more

than 15,000 cases of paralysis each year.

Parents were scared to let their children go outside; travel and commerce between cities were sometimes restricted, and quarantines were imposed.

Polio wreaked havoc on communities.

“I might not remember what I went to the kitchen for today, but I can remember everything about the day I went with my family to get the (polio) vaccine,” said Gary Tietze, who lives in the San Antonio area and is the father to one of the co-authors of this story.

Once vaccines were introduced — specifically, trivalent inactivated poliovirus vaccine (IPV) in 1955 and trivalent oral poliovirus vaccine (OPV) in 1963 — the number of polio cases fell rapidly to less than 100 in the 1960s and fewer than 10 in the 1970s, according to the CDC. Thanks to a successful vaccination program, the United States has now been polio-free since 1979.

But back to those old enough to remember, like Tietze: Have you ever heard the stories of people rushing out for their sugar cubes? (That was the way some of the oral vaccines were given).



The New York City Health Department distributes the oral, Sabin-type polio vaccine in this file photograph. (Getty Images, created May 7, 1962)

Jan Smolinski, of Michigan, recalls that time in her life vividly.

She was 20 years old, and preparing for her wedding.

“The day of my wedding shower, which must have been on a Sunday in April -- my whole wedding party, we went, and it must have been to a community center (or) a church or a school,” Smolinski said. “And we’d wait and there were doctors, nurses and volunteers. And you’d receive your sugar cube. And then you got the second dose a couple months later, because that was the day after (our) wedding. My husband and I went to St. Regis Church in Detroit and got a second dose. That was 1964. The next day, we reminded everyone, ‘Go get your sugar cubes tomorrow!’ And that was before we left on our honeymoon.”

It was Jonas Salk who became a national hero, [the Science History Institute said](#), when he quelled the fear of the dreaded disease with his polio vaccine, approved in 1955. His came first, and then Albert Bruce Sabin introduced an oral vaccine in the United States in the 1960s that replaced Salk’s. [[Read more about Salk and Sabin.](#)] Smolinski took the oral version, hence, the sugar cube.

It must have come as a relief to have a vaccine after all those years.

People with more serious polio symptoms could experience the sensation of pins and needles in the legs; develop meningitis, an infection of the covering of the spinal cord; and paralysis. Of the 57,628 reported cases, there were 3,145 deaths, [according to the website Healthline](#). Franklin D. Roosevelt, the 32nd President of the United States, was diagnosed with polio, in 1921, at the age of 39.

No one is certain of the circumstances leading to FDR’s contraction of polio, but many believe he was exposed to the virus at a Boy Scout camp in New York. It was uncommon for a middle aged person to contract polio, [according to the FDR Library](#). Most cases of the disease were acquired by children. [[Read more about Roosevelt’s circumstances.](#)]



President Franklin D. Roosevelt holds his Scotch terrier on his lap as he talks to Ruthie Bie, the daughter of the Hyde Park caretaker. This photo is one of only two that show Roosevelt in his wheelchair. (Getty Images)

Tietze, who was a young boy at the time, said there were people he knew who ended up paralyzed or dead from the virus. A cousin who lived across the road from his family's dairy farm was hospitalized with polio.

"We didn't see him for a long time," Tietze said of his cousin. "When they finally got out of the hospital, they were quarantined. They lived close to us, and we didn't see them for maybe a couple years. He was (paralyzed). He was young when he got it -- 8 or 9." Tietze admitted that what's happening right now is different in many aspects, but, he said, in the same regard, living through the time of polio was scary -- even traumatic. He spoke of the iron lung, used on some polio patients, and remarked on how frightening they looked.

In the image below, two young children are in an iron lung, a type of pressure ventilator that began use in the 1920s. It was intended for polio patients whose chest muscles had

been effected by the virus, which led to problems breathing. The iron lung would create different pressures, stimulating breathing in the patient.



Two little girls lay in Iron Lung Machines while being treated for Polio.

Smolinski spoke of the iron lung, as well. Her husband had a friend in one.

“You were totally encapsulated,” Smolinski said. “It was quite noisy.”

The now-76-year-old said what sticks with her especially is the fear that surrounded the disease. In a lot of ways, her experience sounds a bit like Tietze’s.

When Smolinski was little, in the late ‘40s or early ‘50s, she had two cousins who got polio. They were both hospitalized -- and they recovered, but it was a stressful time for the family.

“I remember my mom and dad being nervous,” Smolinski said. “It didn’t affect my daily life, but I remember being very scared for my cousins.”

There was one summer she remembers specifically as being “very bad.” Many grew concerned about children playing outside, and people even referred to it as “polio season.” Smolinski said she was probably 9 or 10 years old when polio concerns were incredibly high.

She wonders about how a vaccine would be distributed today. It’s a similar situation in some ways to what’s going on with the novel coronavirus, but also so different. It’s a new era.

But as a little girl, Smolinski thinks back mostly on the situation with her cousins. It’s always a little more “real” when something touches your own family, isn’t it?

“My parents were very upset,” Smolinski said. “It was their nieces. ... It was (also) like, it could happen in our own family. That’s where the fear came in.”



Children in San Angelo, Texas residential areas watch health employees spray DDT over vacant lots in the city to combat an increase in the number of polio cases. All theaters, swimming pools, churches, schools and public meeting places were closed.(Getty Images contributor, created June 11, 1949)



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