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Home Illnesses and conditions Brain, nerves and spinal cord Post-polio syndrome Post-polio syndrome is a slow progressive condition that affects some people that have had polio. It’s not life threatening but it can cause problems in your ability to carry out daily activities. Polio is a serious viral infection that used to be common in the UK and worldwide. It’s rarer now because it can be prevented with vaccination. In around 1 in 100 people, the polio virus causes paralysis, which in rare cases can be life threatening. Cases of polio in the UK fell dramatically when routine vaccination was introduced in the mid-1950s. The symptoms of post-polio syndrome include: The muscle weakness and atrophy usually affects muscles that were previously affected by polio. Sometimes it affects other muscles. This can impact your mobility and your ability to do everyday tasks like brushing your teeth or drying your hair. Chronic fatigue is one of the most common and troublesome symptoms of post-polio syndrome. This can be physical fatigue (tiredness) and brain fatigue. Brain fatigue can cause problems with concentration, attention and memory. MRI scans can show white spots in the brains of polio survivors which may be related to brain fatigue. The symptoms can gradually get worse over many years. There are supportive treatments that can help with symptoms. Although post-polio syndrome is rarely life threatening, some people can develop breathing and swallowing difficulties that can lead to serious problems like chest infections. Some people experience a sensitivity to some types of anaesthesia causing them to take longer to recover from having anaesthesia. Post-polio syndrome is caused by the polio virus. It only affects people who’ve had polio although it can take 15 – 40 years after the infection for it to develop. It’s not known if there’s anything that can be done to prevent it. The exact cause behind who’ll experience post-polio syndrome after having the polio virus is unclear. It could be because of gradual degeneration (breaking down) of nerve cells (motor neurones) in the brainstem or spinal cord that were damaged by the polio virus. This gradual change explains why it can take years for post-polio syndrome symptoms to appear. During recovery from polio, surviving motor neurone cells grow new nerve ends to connect with other muscle fibres. This helps to regain muscle strength as someone recovers from the polio virus. Over time, these new nerve ends put the motor neurone cell under stress. The cells slowly break down, resulting in the loss of muscle strength. People who have had severe polio at a young age or during adolescence (teenage years) might be more likely to experience post-polio syndrome. People who had a more serious infection in early adulthood are also more likely to develop post-polio syndrome. Post-polio syndrome is not contagious. It can be difficult to diagnose post-polio syndrome. There are no specific tests for it, and it can be mistaken for other conditions. Your GP might suspect post-polio syndrome if: