

2019- Acute Flaccid Myelitis (AFM) Questions & Answers

What is AFM?

Acute flaccid myelitis (AFM) is a rare but serious condition affecting the nervous system, specifically the spinal cord. AFM causes weakness in the body's muscles and reflexes.

What are the symptoms of AFM?

AFM causes sudden arm and/or leg weakness. AFM also causes loss of muscle tone and reflexes. Someone with AFM might also have:

- facial droop/weakness
- difficulty moving the eyes
- drooping eyelids
- difficulty with swallowing or slurred speech
- pain in the arms or legs

Rarely, someone with AFM might have numbness or tingling in limbs, and difficulty passing urine. Some patients might have difficulty breathing due to muscle weakness and need ventilator support. AFM can also cause severe neurologic complications.

Who gets AFM?

AFM is not a new condition, but increases in reports of AFM have been seen in the U.S. since 2014. Most cases occurred between August and October, with increases every two years since 2014. At this same time of year, many viruses commonly circulate, including enteroviruses. Most reported cases in the U.S. have been in children, but people of any age can get AFM.

What causes AFM?

There is no known single cause of AFM, but CDC believes viruses, including enteroviruses, might be associated with AFM. In the U.S., most patients with AFM occurring since 2014 had symptoms consistent with a viral illness (ex: runny nose, fever, cough), just before their AFM onset. Sometimes, the cause of a patient's AFM may not be identified.

How is AFM diagnosed?

Tests a doctor might do if they suspect AFM include examining a case's nervous system, taking a Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) scan, testing the cerebral spinal fluid, and checking nerve conduction. It is important that tests are done as soon as possible after someone develops symptoms.

How is AFM treated?

There are no specific treatment recommendations for people diagnosed with AFM. Cases might be referred to neurologists, or doctors who specialize in treating diseases affecting the brain or spinal cord, for care.

How is AFM prevented?

There is no single, specific cause of AFM. However, since AFM can develop as a result of a viral infection, DPH recommends parents and children take basic steps to avoid infections and stay healthy.

- Wash your hands frequently to limit your exposure to germs
- Cover your cough or sneeze
- Stay home if you are sick
- Stay up-to-date on vaccinations
- Protect yourself and your family from mosquito bites if you are spending time outside.

What should I do if I think my child has AFM?

If you see potential symptoms of AFM in your child, (for example, if he or she is not using an arm), contact your health care provider right away. AFM can be diagnosed by examining your child's nervous system, taking an MRI scan, testing the cerebral spinal fluid, and checking nerve conduction. It is important that tests are done as soon as possible after someone develops symptoms. While there is no specific treatment for AFM, doctors may recommend certain interventions on a case-by-case basis.

What is the Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH) doing about AFM?

DPH, in collaboration with local and district public health offices, has been working closely with health care providers to gather information about suspect cases to better understand who gets AFM, why these cases are occurring, and prevention measures. DPH is also in contact with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to share information.

Where can I learn more about AFM?

- Visit the Georgia Department of Public Health's website for more information on AFM in Georgia: <https://dph.georgia.gov/acute-flaccid-myelitis>
- Visit the CDC's website for more information on AFM in the U.S.: <https://www.cdc.gov/acute-flaccid-myelitis/index.html>
- Visit the Transverse Myelitis Association's website for patient and parent resources: <https://myelitis.org/living-with-myelitis/resources/>
- Visit the Acute Flaccid Myelitis Association's website for patient and parent resources: <https://www.afmanow.org/>