



By: **Sharmila Devi**

Might polio re-emerge to threaten millions of people globally?



Few people remember that in the 1950s tens of thousands of people in the western world spent hours each day in an iron lung – a large machine that wrapped around the body and used a pressure system to force the lungs to inflate and deflate.

The last polio patient in the US to use such a device – Martha Lillard – died in June, with the cause of death listed as post-polio syndrome and chronic pulmonary failure.

Her sister recounted that even as a five-year-old in Oklahoma, Lillard worried about the disease because it was so widespread.

“Martha woke up and she couldn’t lift her head off the pillow. She said she knew right away that she had **polio** because she heard so much about it,” her sister Cindy McVey told the BBC.

Funding cuts threaten global eradication

Now, not only has the cultural memory of the terrible disease faded in many countries, but large numbers of people are actively rejecting the vaccine that prevents it.

Meanwhile, donor governments have slashed the funding that could to bring the world over the brink towards eradication.

Massive aid cuts in the US and falling funds from Europe has led to a \$230 million loss for the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI), which groups the World Health Organisation, UNICEF, **GAVI**, the Vaccine Alliance, and others.

The US became the first country to declare polio eradicated in 1979 after several years of mass vaccination

“Due to reduced support from major donors, the GPEI has already been forced to cut its 2026 budget by 30%, causing the programme to scale back operations, especially around

surveillance and outbreak response,” said **GPEI**. “We have the tools and expertise to end polio but without sustained commitment, we risk a global resurgence of this devastating disease – at a cost far exceeding what continued eradication efforts require.”

The US became the first country to declare polio eradicated in 1979 after several years of mass vaccination. From more than 350,000 new polio cases reported annually in the 1980s, there were just under 300 cases in 2025. Only Afghanistan and Pakistan still have actively circulating **wild polio**.

But there are warning signals pointing to an uptick. In 2025, the number of wild polio viruses found naturally in the environment and detected through screening, including of wastewater samples, was 60% higher than in 2019.

Measles resurgence amidst political debate

Another disease that has disappeared from people’s consciousness in wealthy countries is measles, and it too is making a comeback.

Last week, two people who were not vaccinated against **measles** died of the virus in Pennsylvania. The state has seen 393 cases of the highly contagious virus this year, as infections across the US have hit the highest point in 35 years.

Last year, two unvaccinated children in Texas died from a measles outbreak that infected over 1,000 people, primarily children.

But the level of debate over vaccination continues to descend. **Robert F. Kennedy Jr.**, US health secretary, suggested the recent measles deaths were fabricated by staffers for Josh Shapiro, Pennsylvania’s Democratic governor, who held a press conference to announce the deaths.

Last month, President Donald Trump signed an executive order calling for fewer childhood vaccinations

“The performance was a replay of the Democrats' COVID playbook: fear-mongering, misinformation, finger-pointing, and the weaponisation of infectious disease fears for political gain,” Kennedy wrote on X on Aug. 26, using the same adjectives his opponents use to describe the anti-vaxxer movement.

Last month, President **Donald Trump** signed an executive order calling for fewer childhood vaccinations and recommended splitting the mumps, measles and rubella vaccine into three separate shots, even though there are no pharmaceutical companies currently able to provide the vaccinations separately in the US.

The US is on track to lose its status of having eliminated measles, which will be determined in November. **Canada** lost its status last year, and other countries such as the UK may not be far behind.

Ongoing vulnerability and the cost of inaction

Progress against polio may also slip away if the fears of public health officials are realised. The progress has been painstaking and patient, requiring small armies of health workers, often in countries with little infrastructure – sometimes amid active conflict – to reach children in remote and hard to reach areas.



WHO says the international spread of poliovirus still

represents a Public Health Emergency of International Concern

Thanks to such efforts, **WHO** announced in mid-August that five countries had stopped the spread of polio and were advancing towards eradication: Burundi, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, the Republic of Congo, and Uganda.

But WHO says the international spread of poliovirus still represents a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. Wild poliovirus type 1 remains endemic in Afghanistan and Pakistan, while cases of circulating vaccine-derived polio viruses continue to be found across several countries, including Nigeria and Israel this year.

“Even one case can trigger an outbreak,” said Karanveer Singh of UNICEF recently.

In a bitter irony, just days before the British government withdrew **funding** for global polio eradication in March, **polio virus** was detected in London's sewage for the second time this year. Public health officials urged parents to check their children were up to date with polio vaccination.

Historically, the UK was GPEI's second-biggest funder behind the US. The UK's elimination of cash to the organisation was part of more than £6 billion in aid cuts to fund greater defence spending. In an increasingly insecure world, this trajectory is unlikely to change, although the rise of infectious diseases may soon threaten many more people.