

GAZA: Aid agencies and medical professionals warn of dangers of a mass polio outbreak without urgent action, endangering a generation of children

RAMALLAH, 20 August 2024 - Aid agencies and medical professionals have joined forces to call urgently for a ceasefire to allow life-saving polio vaccinations to be administered to about 640,000 children aged under 10 following [confirmation](#) of the first case of polio in Gaza in 25 years, with reports of other suspected cases emerging.

At least 50,000 [children](#) born during the past 10 months of hostilities are highly unlikely to have received any immunizations due to the collapsed health system, while older children among the one million children in Gaza will have had their regular vaccine schedules disrupted or halted by violence and displacement.

Polio had been [eliminated](#) in Gaza more than two decades ago, but last month the WHO [reported](#) that the virus had been found in sewage samples from sites in Khan Younis and Deir Al-Balah. This month, one case was confirmed by Gaza's Ministry of Health in an unvaccinated 10-month-old child in Deir Al-Balah in the central Gaza Strip.

The reemergence of the poliovirus in Gaza is a direct result of the destruction of water and sanitation infrastructure, and the Government of Israel's restrictions on repairs and supplies. Coupled with overcrowding, displacement, and a crippled healthcare system, these actions have created an environment ripe for the spread of the virus in Gaza. A group of about 20 aid agencies and 20 medical professionals who have worked in Gaza said polio vaccines are in the region and ready to be distributed in August and September, but this requires full access for humanitarian supplies into Gaza from all border crossings, and safe, unhindered movement within the Strip. This can only be achieved with an immediate end to hostilities.

"Now polio is confirmed, the response needs to be measured in hours, not weeks. Without immediate action, an entire generation is at risk of infection, and hundreds of children face paralysis by a highly communicable disease that can be prevented with a simple vaccine," said Jeremy Stoner, Save the Children's Regional Director for the Middle East. "These children do not have the luxury of time."

Polio, a virus that [can cause irreversible paralysis in a matter of hours](#), is particularly dangerous in Gaza, where high malnutrition rates and toxic stress levels make children more vulnerable to infection. With Ministry of Health [confirmations of polio](#) in a 10-month-old in Deir Al-Balah, and [WHO reports](#) confirming the presence of [poliovirus in wastewater](#), the situation is beyond alarming.

Humanitarian operations across Gaza are severely hindered by the ongoing bombardment and the obstruction of critical aid supplies and fuel at Israeli-controlled crossing points, and dangerous transit inside the Gaza Strip. Specialist refrigerated trucks needed to safely transport vaccines have been repeatedly rejected from entry, leaving thousands of children at risk.

"The health system in Gaza was destroyed long ago," said Nahed Abu lyada, CARE West Bank and Gaza's Health Program Field Officer.

"Without an immediate ceasefire and access to vaccines and humanitarian aid across the Strip, the people of Gaza are facing a public health disaster that will spread and endanger children across the region and beyond."

Humanitarian organisations urgently call for an immediate and sustained ceasefire to allow polio vaccinations to take place in Gaza. For a polio vaccination campaign to be effective, it must be able to reach at least 95% of targeted children, and this cannot happen in an active war zone. Any ceasefire or [pause requested](#) by the UN must be used to facilitate full humanitarian access, not just for vaccines but for the full range of assistance needed to sustain civilians' basic needs. All parties to conflict have an obligation to facilitate humanitarian access at all times, regardless of whether conflict is active or not.

ENDS

Notes to Editors:

- Polio can cause total paralysis within hours and is especially dangerous for children under five.
- The World Health Organization has confirmed the presence of poliovirus in Gaza.

Signed:

Islamic Relief Worldwide
MedGlobal
ActionAid
Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP)
War Child
Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)
WeWorld
CARE
Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP)
Humanity & Inclusion/ Handicap International (HI)
DanChurchAid
ChildFund Alliance
Plan International
Accion Contra el Hambre (ACF)
Médicos del Mundo (Médecins du Monde Spain)
Oxfam
International Rescue Committee
Mercy Corps
Children Not Numbers NGO
Save the Children

Doctors and medical professionals:

Feroze Sidhwa, MD, MPH, FACS, FICS

Trauma, critical care, acute care, and General Surgeon

Served at European Hospital, Khan Younis, March 25 - April 8, 2024
French Camp, CA

Thaer Ahmad, MD

Emergency Medicine Physician
Served at Nasser Hospital, January 2024

John Kahler, MD, FAAP

MedGlobal Cofounder
Served in Tel al-Sultan, Rafah, Gaza, January, March 2024

Abdullah Ghali, MD

Orthopedic Surgery Resident
European Hospital in Khan Younis, April 3 - 8, 2024
Houston, TX

Abeerah Muhammad MSN, RN, CEN

Emergency and Critical Care Nurse
European Hospital, May 2024

Yipeng Ge, MD, MPH, CCFP

Primary Care Physician and Public Health Practitioner
Tal Al Sultan Primary Health Care Center in Rafah, February 12-19, 2024
Ottawa, Canada

Benjamin Thomson, MD, MSc, MPH(c), FRCPC

Internal Medicine, Nephrology, Public Health
Multiple sites in Rafah, Deir-el-balah
March 2024
Toronto, Canada

Noor Amin, MD, CCFP(SEM), FCFP

Primary Care, Emergency and Sports Medicine physician
Al Aqsa Hospital and European Gaza Hospital April 2024
Mississauga, Canada

Ahmad Yousaf, MD

Internal Medicine/Pediatrician
Al-Aqsa Shushes Hospital, June 24- July 16, 2024

Nabeel Rana, MD

Vascular Surgeon
Served at Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, Deir al-Balah, June 20 - July 9, 2024

Hina Cheema, MD

Obstetrician and Gynecologist
Served in Al Emirati hospital, Rafah March 2024
Served in Nassar hospital, Khan Younis, June-July, 2024

Ahmed Ebeid

Anesthesia

Served in European General Hospital, January - February 2024

Served in Kamal Eledwan Hospital, March- April 2024

Bilal Piracha, MD

Clinical Assistant Professor Emergency Medicine

Served at Aqsa Hospital, DeirAl-Balah, March 7 -19 & July 19- 25, 2024

Served at Al Ahli Hospital (Gaza City), July 26 - August 1, 2024

Professor Nick Maynard MS, FRCS, FRCSEd

Consultant Surgeon (General and Thoracic Surgery)

Oxford University Hospitals, Oxford, UK

Served as member of Medical Aid for Palestinians Emergency Medical teams in Gaza:

December 26, 2023 – January 8, 2024, Al Aqsa Hospital, Deir Al Balah, Gaza

April 22– May 6, 2024, Al Aqsa Hospital, Deir Albalah, Gaza

Javid Abdelmoneim FRCP, DTMH

Emergency Medicine Physician

Nasser Medical Complex, Khan Younis June -July 2024

Khaled Dawas MD, FRCS (General Surgeon)

Consultant Surgeon

University College London Hospitals

Member of Medial Aid for Palestinians Emergency Medical Teams in Gaza 2023/4

Dr. Trish Scanlan

Paediatrician & Co-Medical Director

Children Not Numbers

Dr James Smith MBBS, MA, MSc, MSc

Emergency Physician, UK

Lecturer in Humanitarian Policy and Practice, UCL, UK

Served in Al Aqsa Hospital, December 16, 2023 - January 8, 2024

Served in Al-Mawasi, Rafah, Al-Aqsa Hospital, & supported patient evacuations ins
Gaza City, North Gaza)

Alia Kattan MD

Anesthesia and Critical Care Medicine

Served in European General Hospital, Gaza, April 29 - May 17, 2024

Tanya Haj-Hassan, BMBCh, MSc

Served in Gaza, March 11-25, 2024