

Polio returns to Papua New Guinea after 18 years: WHO

June 26 2018

An outbreak of polio has been confirmed in Papua New Guinea, the World Health Organization and the government said, with the virus detected in a child 18 years after the Pacific nation was declared free of the disease.

The WHO said there was one confirmed case—a six-year-old boy with lower limb weakness from Morobe province—with the disease detected in late April, and paralysis associated with the [virus](#) confirmed in May.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said the same virus was also isolated from [stool specimens](#) of two healthy children in the same community, "representing an outbreak", the WHO added.

"We are deeply concerned about this polio case in Papua New Guinea, and the fact that the virus is circulating," PNG's Health Secretary Pascoe Kase said in a statement Monday.

"Our immediate priority is to respond and prevent more children from being infected."

Steps taken to stop the spread of the highly contagious, crippling disease include conducting large-scale immunisation campaigns and strengthening surveillance systems that help detect it early.

PNG has not had a case of the disease since 1996, and was certified as polio-free in 2000 along with the rest of the WHO's Western Pacific

region.

There is low polio vaccine coverage in Morobe province, on PNG's northern coast, with only 61 percent of children receiving the recommended three doses, the WHO said.

The international body added that inadequate sanitation and hygiene were also issues in the area.

The WHO said the region's isolation and the planned immunisation activities meant the risk of the virus spreading to other countries was low.

Affecting mostly children under the age of five, polio—which has no cure and can only be prevented by giving a child multiple vaccine doses—can lead to irreversible paralysis.

According to the WHO, the number of polio [cases](#) worldwide has fallen by more than 99 percent since 1988, from an estimated 350,000 cases then to 22 reported cases in 2017.

Only three countries—Afghanistan, Nigeria and Pakistan—were considered [polio](#)-endemic by the WHO in March.

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