World Polio Day – 24 October 2026

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News

World Polio Day is observed every year on 24 October. Rotary International created it to commemorate the birth of Jonas Salk, who led the team that developed the first vaccine against polio (Salk was actually born on 28 Oct 1914). Wild poliovirus (WPV1) still circulates in only two countries – Pakistan and Afghanistan; in 2026 Afghanistan has 42 cases (GPEI, reported 23 Oct) and Pakistan 6 (as of 5 Oct). Polio spread remains a 'Public Health Emergency of International Concern' (PHEIC).

Key facts

Created by	Rotary International – in honour of Jonas Salk
Vaccines	IPV (injected, inactivated) – Jonas Salk, 1955; OPV (oral, live attenuated) – Albert Sabin
India	Last case – Howrah (West Bengal), 13 Jan 2011; WHO certification (SE Asia Region) – 27 Mar 2014
Pulse Polio	First national round 9 Dec 1995; children under 5
Endemic	Pakistan, Afghanistan (WPV1)
Eradicated types	WPV2 – 2015; WPV3 – declared 2019

Background

- Science: polio is caused by the poliovirus, an enterovirus; it spreads by the faecal–oral route through contaminated water and food. It multiplies in the gut and sometimes attacks the motor neurons of the spinal cord, causing permanent paralysis; mostly children under 5 are affected.
- Vaccine history: Salk's injected IPV was licensed in 1955; Sabin's oral OPV spread in the 1960s – cheap, easy to give, and it also builds gut immunity. Rarely, OPV's weakened virus can mutate into 'circulating vaccine-derived poliovirus' (cVDPV); to reduce this, 'novel OPV2' (nOPV2) got WHO Emergency Use Listing in 2020.
- Global effort: the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) began in 1988 – WHO, Rotary, UNICEF, US CDC; later the Gates Foundation and Gavi joined. Rotary's 'PolioPlus' began in 1985. The African Region was certified free of wild polio in 2020 (including Nigeria).
- India: Universal Immunisation Programme (UIP) 1985; first national Pulse Polio round on 9 Dec 1995. The last wild polio case was at Howrah (West Bengal) on 13 Jan 2011; India was removed from the endemic list in Feb 2012 and certified polio-free with the WHO South-East Asia Region on 27 Mar 2014. OPV drops are now given along with fractional IPV (fIPV) injections.

Tamil Nadu link: Rotary chose Tamil Nadu to launch its 'PolioPlus' programme; then CM M.G. Ramachandran gave State Health Minister Dr H.V. Hande (1980–86) a free hand to start a mass polio immunisation drive, and the State public health department was placed at Rotary's disposal. Hande has said the nation-wide Pulse Polio concept was Rotary's brainchild and began in Tamil Nadu (Rotary News). Tamil Nadu has been polio-free for 21 years (Health Minister Ma. Subramanian, Oct 2025).

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