



Frederick M. Maynard, MD

Ask Dr. Maynard

Send your questions for Dr. Maynard
to info@post-polio.org.

See other questions at
www.post-polio.org/edu/askdrmay.html.

Question: *I had polio at age 5 and am now 76. I have weakness in all four limbs. My legs have been weak for a long time while my arms and shoulders started getting weaker 2-3 years ago. I cannot lift my left arm past my shoulder. My right arm is better but not good.*

The PT here at the retirement home we are in suggests that I do strengthening exercises for my shoulders and scapula. I wonder about that since all four limbs are weak. I have a walker and a power wheelchair, though they urge me to use the walker rather than the wheelchair. I wonder if that's the best advice.

Answer: It is never easy to know if later-life new weakness in a polio survivor is from PPS or from other common age-related problems such as shoulder tendonitis/bursitis that leads to restricted shoulder movement and weakness. Since your arm/upper limb weakness is quite recent, I would recommend you be evaluated for physical therapy (or other) treatments for the shoulder to restore good passive movement and for strengthening exercises. If guidelines for gentle (non-vigorous) strengthening exercises are followed, there is no risk of damage and some benefit is likely. You may wish to read and show your therapist the Position Statement by PHI on Exercise for Polio Survivors (www.post-polio.org/edu/pphnews/pph19-2a.html).

Regarding the issue of using your walker versus your power wheelchair for daily mobility, this strictly depends on how far and how often you walk, as well as how effortful and how safe it is for you to walk with the walker. Certainly, it benefits general health to continue to do at least some upright weight-bearing walking for as long as possible, assuming it can be done without undue risk of falling or of straining shoulders/arms/hands.

An excellent resource for you to read about preserving strength and function in the shoulders is a 30-page booklet titled "SOS—Save Our Shoulders: A Guide for Polio Survivors" authored by Kuehl, Costello and Wechsler and which is available on Polio Place (www.polioplace.org/sites/default/files/files/Save-Our-Shoulders.pdf). ■

Question: *I am now age 89 and am plagued by extreme tiredness with sleepiness/drowsiness and terrible balance issues. My history includes a triple arthrodesis of the right ankle with a tendon transfer. My polio in 1947 was treated with the Sister Kenny Treatment—can still smell the hot, steamy wool blankets.*

I try to do some mostly stretching exercises and wonder if I should challenge myself with more vigorous ones. I weigh 160 lbs. and have shrunk to 5'9" from 6'2". I have had a lumbar laminectomy, discectomy, plus a cervical fusion. I just want to prevent further deterioration. Or do I accept these symptoms?

Answer: I am concerned to hear about your "extreme tiredness with sleepiness/drowsiness" symptoms because they are suggestive of pulmonary and/or cardiac function decline. Nocturnal breathing disorders (sleep apneas and/or nocturnal hypoventilation) are common in older polio survivors and perhaps you should seek evaluation of your breathing capacities. Another diagnostic possibility could be slowly developing heart failure that can lead to declining blood flow to the brain and associated drowsiness/tiredness. This is a common occurrence among "very old seniors (>age 85)," particularly those with any history of hypertension, diabetes or cardiovascular disease.

I would encourage you to seek a good comprehensive medical evaluation at a good geriatric clinic. If you still reside in southeast Michigan, the Turner Geriatric Clinic is a good option. After such an evaluation, a physician could give you individual advice on how much and what types of exercise to pursue. Otherwise, all I can suggest is to remain as active as you can and to do it safely.

The fact that you are balance-challenged is not surprising and probably can't be improved much. Making good adaptations for your balance impairments through optimal choices of “adaptive equipment” and type of activities to prioritize is your personal challenge. This is inevitably based on your individual preferences and priorities in life as well as your current safe functional capacities. ■