Polio (poliomyelitis) mainly affects children under five years of age. One in 200 infections leads to irreversible paralysis. Among those paralyzed, 5% to 10% die when their breathing muscles become immobilized. Polio cases have decreased by over 99% since 1988, from an estimated 350,000 cases then, to 223 reported cases in 2012. The reduction is the result of the global effort to eradicate the disease. In 2013, only three countries (Afghanistan, Nigeria and Pakistan) remain polio-endemic, down from more than 125 in 1988. They face a range of challenges such as insecurity, weak health systems and poor sanitation. Polio can spread from these ‘endemic’ countries to infect children in other countries with less-than-adequate vaccination. As long as a single child remains infected, children in all countries are at risk of contracting polio. Failure to eradicate polio from these last remaining strongholds could result in as many as 200,000 new cases every year, within 10 years, all over the world. Unlike most diseases, polio can be completely eradicated. There are three strains of wild poliovirus, none of which can survive for long periods outside of the human body. If the virus cannot find an unvaccinated person to infect, it will die out. Type 2 wild poliovirus was eradicated in 1999.

Cheap and effective vaccines are available to prevent polio. There are two forms of vaccine available to ward off polio - oral polio vaccine (OPV) and inactivated polio vaccine (IPV). Because OPV is an oral vaccine, it can be administered by anyone, even volunteers. One dose of OPV can cost as little as 11 US cents.

The global effort to eradicate polio is the largest public-private partnership for public health. In fact, it is the largest-ever internationally-coordinated public health effort in history. It is spearheaded by national governments, WHO, Rotary International, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and UNICEF, and is supported by key partners including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Underpinning the effort is a global network of more than 20 million volunteers worldwide who have collectively immunized more than 2.5 billion children over the past 20 years.