

Accidental side effect: COVID-19 pandemic could give polio ‘a fresh start’

The world's total number of confirmed [Covid-19](#) cases is closing in on 5 million. But an accidental side effect of the pandemic—an indefinite pause in the worldwide campaign to eradicate polio—could dwarf its toll by allowing the almost-vanquished disease to get a fresh start.

At the [end](#) of March, on the advice of a World Health Organization panel of experts, mass vaccination campaigns against polio and measles were put on hold to prevent spreading the virus.

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The math behind these decisions is tricky. In April, a modeling project at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine tried to [calculate](#) the hazards of taking children to be vaccinated, and potentially exposing them, their families, and health care workers to Covid-19, versus leaving them unvaccinated, and thus risking them catching these preventable diseases. In a paper that is still online as a preprint (not yet peer-reviewed), researchers in the Centre for Mathematical Modelling of Infectious Diseases estimated that some deaths from Covid-19 exposures would happen—but anywhere from 37 to 549 other deaths would be avoided, because children would not develop diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis, hepatitis, meningitis, or yellow fever.

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“Our messaging has been that we need to maintain essential services like immunization,” says [the WHO’s] Dr. Fiona Braka.

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