

'They told me I wouldn't live past 30'

Phyllis Kemnetz's polio survival story is a reminder of how far we've come with vaccinations

On September 2, 1952, 14-year-old Phyllis Kemnetz got a headache that would change her life.

"I told people it hurt like, well, a word we weren't supposed to say back then," Kemnetz, now 86 and living in Savoy, Illinois, recalls with a smirk.

She was about to become a statistic in a polio epidemic and battle a disease that still impacts her in 2024.

Though polio is nearly eradicated today thanks to childhood vaccinations, both the disease and the shots have garnered headlines lately. This month, [Paul Alexander](#), who spent much of his life in an iron lung, passed away at age 78. And the state of Illinois is combating a [measles outbreak](#), reminding us of the importance of vaccines.

Kemnetz's story

Kemnetz says the week she got her headache that led to a polio diagnosis was a painful blur.

"All my senses were on high alert," she says. "The littlest sound was like somebody stomping next to my ear. We had a little night light. I couldn't even stand to have it on."

On Sunday, the family doctor made a house call and immediately called for an ambulance. Kemnetz wound up at Mercy Hospital in Urbana, Illinois (now [OSF HealthCare Heart of Mary Medical Center](#)). That next month, she says, was also a blur. Among other things, doctors upon her arrival performed a spinal tap to examine Kemnetz's spinal fluid. She also recalls waking up one day with doctors preparing to put her in an iron lung to help her breathe.

"I screamed at my parents not to put me in that. I was terrified," Kemnetz says.

After leaving the hospital, Kemnetz got more treatment near her home before spending over a year at a hospital in New York. There, she reprogrammed her leg muscles to work through repetitious exercises. It's what we know today as physical therapy. Eventually, she returned to a mostly normal life and a career in real estate.

Polio then vs. now

[Albert England, MD](#), an infectious disease physician at OSF HealthCare, says polio has been around "for a long time." There's even evidence of ancient Egyptians having it, he says. The disease is caused by a virus that "invades the nervous system and can cause total paralysis in a matter of hours," according to the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO). Other symptoms are flu-like, including fever, difficulty breathing, fatigue, headache, vomiting, a stiff neck and pain in the arms or legs.

Dr. England says today, doctors use ventilators to help sick people who can't breathe. But back in 1952, the iron lung – which Kemnetz got acquainted with – was the help available for people with polio.

"It produced negative pressure around the patient, allowing the lungs to expand and contract regularly," Dr. England explains.

"It was like having CPR 24/7," Kemnetz says of lying in the tube. "So uncomfortable."

Kemnetz also gave blood to help develop a polio vaccine, the number one way we have come to fight that disease and many others. It's a topic she's passionate about today.

"We have to save the children," she says.

The [United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC) says children should get four doses of the polio vaccine as a part of routine childhood vaccinations. The CDC says while it's rare, adults who know or suspect they did not get the shots as kids should get them as adults. Adults who are at an increased risk of getting the disease, such as working in a laboratory where the virus may be present, can get a booster shot.

"The vaccine prevents illness by developing antibodies," Dr. England explains.

Kemnetz today

In 1985, Kemnetz developed post-polio syndrome, a disorder that weakens the nerves and muscles. She says her hands "look nice," but everyday tasks like writing, eating or shuffling cards are tough.

"There are just not as many neurons providing the strength the people need," Dr. England says of post-polio syndrome.

But, after being told in 1952 that walking, having children and living a long life was unlikely, Kemnetz is counting her blessings. Among them are the chances to recount her life story with her children and grandchildren.

"I think I thumbed my nose at them pretty good," she quips about her prognosis back then. "The word 'can't' isn't in my vocabulary."