

## **Mutant Vaccine Causes Polio Outbreak**

A mutated polio vaccine has infected at least three people in the Dominican Republic and Haiti, causing the first outbreak of the disease in the Western Hemisphere since 1991, the Pan American Health Organization said.

"This is not a desperate situation from the view of outbreak control...but it is still a surprise," said spokesperson Daniel Epstein on Sunday.

The outbreak has been traced to the same oral vaccine experts have used to eliminate the disease in many countries.

Polio is a highly infectious disease that usually strikes children under five. It damages the spinal cord and brain, causing paralysis and sometimes death.

"Everyone here is worried," hospital director Jose Matos Perez was quoted saying in Listin Diario newspaper.

The last case of polio in the Americas was diagnosed in Peru in 1991.

The organization said tests have confirmed two cases in the Dominican Republic and one in Haiti since July and doctors are investigating 16 other patients suffering polio-like paralysis. None of the patients has died.

The vaccine, known as Sabin 1 oral poliovirus vaccine, uses a weakened version of the virus which is supposed to teach the body how to identify and fight active viruses.

The mutated virus is 97 per cent identical to the one used in the vaccine, the organization said.

Epstein said doctors believe the three infected people may have caught the mutated strain from someone else. That person - or persons - may have received a standard vaccination that mutated within them, then passed it on.

The only other known case of an oral vaccine mutating into a virulent strain was in Egypt between 1983 and 1993, he said. More than 30 people were infected with that strain.