

B O T U L I S M

WHAT IS BOTULISM?

Botulism is a muscle-paralyzing disease caused by a toxin made by a bacterium called *Clostridium botulinum*.

There are three main kinds of botulism:

- ◆ **Foodborne:** occurs when a person ingests pre-formed toxin that leads to illness within a few hours to days. It is a public health emergency because the contaminated food may still be available to other people.
- ◆ **Infant:** occurs in a small number of susceptible infants each year who have *C. botulinum* in their intestinal tract.
- ◆ **Wound:** occurs when wounds are infected with *C. botulinum* that secretes the toxin.

Botulism is not spread from person to person.

WHAT KIND OF GERM IS CLOSTRIDIUM BOTULINUM?

Clostridium botulinum is the name of a group of bacteria commonly found in soil. The rod-shaped organisms grow best in low oxygen conditions. They form spores that allow them to survive in a dormant (asleep) state until conditions are right for them to grow.

TREATMENT

Botulism is treated with an anti-toxin. The antitoxin is effective in reducing the severity of the symptoms when taken early. Most patients eventually recover after weeks to months of supportive care.

ARE THERE COMPLICATIONS FROM BOTULISM?

Botulism can result in death due to respiratory failure, but only 8% of those infected die. A patient with severe botulism may require several months of medical care, including a breathing machine. Patients who survive botulism poisoning may have fatigue and shortness of breath for years and long-term therapy may be needed to aid recovery.



SYMPTOMS

With foodborne botulism, symptoms (warning signs) begin within 6 hours to 2 weeks after eating the contaminated food. Symptoms include double vision, blurred vision, drooping eyelids, slurred speech, difficulty swallowing, dry mouth, muscle weakness that always descends through the body. Paralysis of breathing muscles can cause a person to stop breathing and die, unless assistance with breathing is provided.

PREVENTION

Botulism can be prevented. Foodborne cases are often from home-canned foods with low acid content. Persons who can food at home should follow strict hygienic practices to reduce contamination. Also, oils infused with garlic or herbs should be refrigerated. Potatoes which have been baked while wrapped in aluminum foil should be kept hot until served or refrigerated. Because the botulism toxin is destroyed by high temperatures, persons who eat home-canned foods should consider boiling the food for 10 minutes before eating. Because honey can contain spores of *Clostridium botulinum* and this has been a source of infant infection, children less than 1 year of age should not be fed honey. Honey is safe for persons older than age 1. Wound botulism can be prevented by promptly seeking medical care for infected wounds and by not using injectable street drugs.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

Department of State Health Services
<http://www.dshs.state.tx.us>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
<http://www.cdc.gov>