

BOTULISM FACT SHEET

What is botulism?

Botulism is a muscle paralyzing disease caused by a toxin (poison) made by the bacterium *Clostridium botulinum*. These bacteria can form spores and are commonly found in dirt. There are three different types of botulism: foodborne, infant and wound botulism.

How do you get it?

- Foodborne botulism is caused by ingesting (swallowing) toxin that is in foods contaminated by the bacteria. This is the most serious form of the disease.
- Infant botulism (also known as intestinal) is caused by ingesting (swallowing) the bacteria. Illness will begin when the bacteria begins producing the toxin in the intestinal tract.
- Wound botulism occurs when the bacteria infects the wound and begins producing the toxin in the wound. Using injectable street drugs can expose people to the bacteria.

What are the symptoms?

The most common symptoms of botulism include double vision, blurred vision, drooping eyelids, slurred speech, difficulty swallowing, dry mouth and muscle weakness. These are all symptoms of muscle paralysis. Respiratory failure can also occur. In the United States 5-10% of people with foodborne botulism will die.

How soon do infected people get sick?

When people swallow the toxin (foodborne botulism) the symptoms usually begin within 18 to 36 hours but can occur as early as 6 hours or as late as 10 days. Symptoms of infant and wound botulism will usually begin a little later than foodborne because the bacteria must start producing the toxin after they enter the body.

What should I do if I think I have been exposed to botulism?

If you think you have foodborne botulism, you should contact your doctor immediately. Botulism is treated with a specific anti-toxin and must be requested from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The anti-toxin should be used as soon as possible. It can prevent patients from getting worse, but recovery can take many months.

How can we prevent botulism?

Thoroughly washing food items and properly refrigerating them will greatly reduce the potential for the botulism bacteria to develop. Outbreaks of foodborne botulism have been caused by:

- home canned foods
- certain vegetables stored in oil (such as garlic or hot peppers)
- baked potatoes wrapped in foil that are stored at room temperature after cooking

Bacterial spores from the dirt can remain on foods or enter wounds. They will begin growing and making toxins when the oxygen around the bacteria is removed or greatly reduced. Because honey can contain the bacteria, this has been a source of botulism in infants. Children less than 12 months old should not be fed honey. Honey is safe for people older than 12 months. Wound botulism can be prevented by quickly getting medical care for infected wounds and by not using injectable street drugs.

Where can I get more information on botulism?

www.cdc.gov

www.dshs.state.tx.us

Source of information:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)