



BOTULISM (bot-u-lism)

What is botulism?

Botulism is a paralytic illness caused by a nerve toxin that is produced by bacteria called *Clostridium botulinum*. Eating foods that contain the botulism toxin causes foodborne botulism. Wound botulism is caused by a toxin produced when a wound is infected with *C. botulinum*. Consuming the botulism spores that then grow in the intestines and release toxin causes infant botulism. All forms of botulism can be fatal and are considered medical emergencies.

How does a person get botulism?

C. botulinum is naturally found in soil and may get into food and under certain circumstances, produce toxin. For food botulism, a person must swallow contaminated food after the toxin has been produced. For infant botulism, the infant needs to eat food that contains the bacteria; certain foods, such as honey, are more likely to be contaminated. For wound botulism, the bacteria need to get into a wound and then have the proper conditions to allow the toxin to be produced. Botulism is not spread from person-to-person. The toxin can be destroyed by heat.

What are the symptoms?

Foodborne and wound botulism produce symptoms that affect the nervous system, including: blurred or double vision, dry mouth, difficulty swallowing, muscle weakness, muscle paralysis, and slurred speech. In some cases, the disease may cause respiratory paralysis and death. Infants with botulism often become constipated, stop eating and become sluggish; these symptoms may then be followed by the more severe nervous system symptoms. Symptoms for foodborne botulism usually develop in 12 - 36 hours after ingestion of the contaminated food. Infant botulism symptoms appear between 3 - 30 days after ingestion of the bacteria. Symptoms appear in wound botulism between 4 - 14 days after exposure.

How can you prevent botulism infection?

- Persons who do home canning should follow strict hygiene procedures to reduce contamination of foods.
- Oils made with garlic and herbs should be refrigerated.
- Potatoes that have been baked while wrapped in aluminum foil should be kept hot until served or refrigerated.
- Because high temperatures destroy the botulism toxin, persons who eat home-canned food should consider boiling the food for 10 minutes before eating to ensure safety.
- Children under 1 year of age should not be fed honey. 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 1-800-958-6400 or the local Public Health Nursing office.