

BOTULISM FACT SHEET

What is botulism?

Botulism is a rare but serious illness caused by a nerve toxin (poison) produced by bacteria, most commonly *Clostridium botulinum*. Three major kinds of botulism include foodborne botulism, wound botulism and infant botulism.

Who can get botulism?

Anyone. Injection drug users are at an increased risk for wound botulism.

What are the symptoms of botulism?

Typical symptoms of botulism include double vision, blurred vision, drooping eyelids, slurred speech, difficulty swallowing, dry mouth and muscle weakness. Infants with botulism appear lethargic, feed poorly, are constipated, have a weak cry and have poor muscle tone.

How does someone get botulism?

Foodborne botulism is caused by eating foods that contain the botulinum toxin, most often home-canned foods prepared in an unsafe manner. Wound botulism is caused by toxin produced from a wound infected with *Clostridium botulinum*. Infant botulism is caused by consuming the spores of the botulinum bacteria, which then grow in the intestines and release toxin.

How soon do symptoms appear?

In foodborne botulism, symptoms generally begin 18–36 hours after eating a contaminated food, but they can occur as early as six hours or as late as 10 days.

How is botulism treated?

It can be treated with an antitoxin that blocks the action of toxin circulating in the blood. If given before complete paralysis, antitoxin can prevent worsening and shorten recovery time. Physicians may try to remove contaminated food still in the gut by inducing vomiting or using enemas. Wounds should be treated,

usually surgically, to remove the source of the toxin-producing bacteria followed by administration of appropriate antibiotics. A patient with severe botulism may require a breathing machine as well as intensive care for several months. Botulism can be fatal and is a medical emergency. If you or someone you know has symptoms suggestive of botulism, consult a healthcare provider or go to the emergency room.

How can people protect themselves against botulism?

- **Foodborne botulism:** Carefully follow sanitary procedures to reduce contamination and instructions when doing home canning, including the use of pressure canners and cookers. You can also protect yourself by doing the following: 1) Keep oils infused with garlic or herbs refrigerated, 2) Keep potatoes that have been baked while wrapped in aluminum foil hot until served or refrigerated and 3) Boil home-processed, low-acid and tomato foods canned foods in a saucepan for 10 minutes before serving.
- **Wound botulism:** Quickly seek medical care for infected wounds and do not use injectable street drugs.
- **Infant botulism:** Most cases cannot be prevented because the bacteria that causes this disease can be found in soil and dust, inside homes on floors, carpet, and countertops even after cleaning. Children younger than 12 months old should not be fed honey because it can contain the bacteria that cause botulism. Honey is safe for people one year of age and older.

Where can I get more information?

Information about botulism and other related health topics can be found at www.cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please visit www.doh.dc.gov or call (202) 442-9371.