

# **Fact Sheet: Botulism**

#### What is Botulism?

Botulism is a muscle-paralyzing disease caused by a poison produced by *Clostridium botulinum*.

Botulinum particles can be found in all soil worldwide. There are three main types of botulism. Foodborne botulism is caused by eating food that contains the botulism toxin. Wound botulism is very rare and can occur in a wound that is infected with *Clostridium botulinum*, which then secrets the toxin. Intestinal (infant) botulism is rare and it most often occurs in infants under one year of age.

## What are the symptoms?

#### Foodborne Botulism:

- General weakness, marked fatigue
- Blurred or double vision
- Dry mouth, difficulty swallowing and speaking
- Drooping eyelids
- Vomiting, diarrhea, or constipation
- Muscle weakness that starts at the shoulders and moves down the body
- Paralysis of the muscles that control breathing, which can cause death

Neurological symptoms of Foodborne Botulism usually occur within 12-36 hours or up to several days after eating contaminated food.

### **Wound Botulism:**

Symptoms are similar to foodborne but may take up to 2 weeks to appear.

### Intestinal (Infant) Botulism:

- Constipation
- Loss of appetite
- Altered cry
- Weakness, and striking loss of head control
- Breathing difficulties

# How is it spread?

Botulism is NOT spread from person-to-person. Foodborne botulism can occur in all age groups. It occurs when a person ingests contaminated food, such as improperly cooked, improperly reheated food, or home-canned foods. Wound botulism occurs when soil or gravel with the bacteria contaminate the wound. Intestinal botulism occurs when an infant ingests the bacteria that then produce the poison in his/her intestine. The bacteria most often come from dust and food, including honey.

#### How is the disease treated?

Prompt diagnosis and early treatment are essential. Botulinum antitoxin should be administered as soon as possible. Before the antitoxin is given to children, pregnant women, or immune-compromised persons, skin testing should be preformed to assess sensitivity to the serum or antitoxin. The antitoxin is effective in reducing the severity of symptoms if administered early in the course of the disease. Hospital care is necessary. Most patients eventually recover after weeks to months of supportive care. Untreated botulism may result in death.

### How is it prevented?

Commercial food cans that are bulging should be returned to the store unopened. Foods that smell bad should not be tasted or eaten. Never feed honey to an infant, since honey may be a source of *Clostridium botulinum*. Wounds should be promptly and thoroughly cleaned. There is no vaccine for botulism at this time.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information call your health care provider or call Washtenaw County Public Health at 734-544-6700.

