

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 botulinum spores. 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

How is it spread?

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

How is the disease treated?

Antitoxin is given in certain cases of foodborne botulism but not in cases of intestinal botulism. (Contact your local physician for more information about a new treatment for infants.) 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 botulism bacteria.** Wounds should be promptly and thoroughly cleaned.

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.

