

Botulism Fact Sheet

Botulism is a rare illness that causes paralysis.

Botulism is a rare but serious illness caused by a nerve toxin (poison) that affects the nervous system and causes paralysis. *Clostridium botulinum* (*C. botulinum*) bacteria produce this toxin, called botulinum toxin, and are found in soil and dust worldwide. Botulism is a medical and public health emergency.

Botulism is not spread from person to person.

There are three major ways people get botulism:

- By eating food or drink that contains the botulinum toxin
- In infants, by swallowing spores of the bacteria that then grow and produce the toxin
- By a wound infected with the bacteria that produce the botulinum toxin

Symptoms to look for:

- Drooping eyelids
- Double or blurred vision
- Dry mouth, a thick-feeling tongue, or difficulty swallowing
- Loss of facial expression or slurred speech
- Muscle weakness, which typically moves from the head, downwards to the rest of the body

Infants with botulism may appear lethargic, feed poorly, be constipated, have a weak cry, or have poor muscle tone.

If not treated quickly, paralysis can continue down both sides of the body causing paralysis of the arms, legs, and trunk and breathing problems. Death can result from respiratory failure or from the consequences of long-term paralysis.

Symptoms from foodborne botulism typically occur between 6 hours to 10 days (usually 18 to 36 hours) after eating contaminated food or drink. People with wound botulism may not experience symptoms until several days after the wound is infected with the bacteria.

Seek emergency medical attention if you have symptoms of botulism.

Botulism is diagnosed by the combination of a doctor suspecting botulism due to a patient's symptoms and history, and by laboratory testing.

There is treatment for botulism, which can be life-saving.

If recognized early, botulism can be treated. For infants, botulism is treated with the licensed human botulism antitoxin, BabyBIG®. For older children and adults, botulism is treated with an antitoxin.

There are steps you can take to prevent botulism.

To reduce risk of foodborne botulism, follow safe home canning practices. Inspect store-bought or home-canned, jarred, or fermented food for contamination. Follow manufacturer's storage and handling instructions of food products.

To reduce risk of wound botulism, always seek medical care promptly for infected wounds, and avoid injectable street drugs, which can sometimes cause wound botulism.

To reduce risk of infant botulism, never give honey to infants less than 12 months of age because honey can contain the spores of bacteria that cause infant botulism.