

# BOTULISM FACTSHEET

## What is Botulism?

Botulism is a rare but serious illness caused by a toxin (poison) that attacks the body's nerves. This toxin is made by certain kinds of bacteria (*Clostridium botulinum* and sometimes *Clostridium butyricum* and *Clostridium baratii*). Foodborne botulism, wound botulism, and infant botulism are three of the most common forms of this illness.

## 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. Foodborne botulism may cause vomiting, diarrhea, nausea, and stomach pain. Infants with botulism appear lethargic, feed poorly, are constipated, have a weak cry, and have poor muscle tone. People with botulism might not have all the symptoms at the same time.

## How soon do symptoms appear?

In foodborne botulism, symptoms generally begin 18 to 36 hours after eating contaminated food.

## 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 toxins.

## How is Botulism treated?

Doctors treat botulism with a drug called an antitoxin, which prevents the toxin from causing any more harm. Antitoxin does not heal the damage the toxin has already done. People with wound botulism sometimes need

surgery to remove the source of the bacteria and may need to take antibiotics. A patient with severe botulism may require a breathing machine as well as intensive care for several months.

## What should I do if I think I have Botulism?

All kinds of botulism can be fatal and are medical emergencies. **If you or someone you know has symptoms of botulism, see your doctor, or go to the emergency room immediately.**

## 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 refrigerating them with the foil loosened, and 3) Refrigerate any canned or pickled foods after you open them.
- **Wound Botulism:** Keep wounds clean. keeping wounds clean. If wounds appear infected, seek medical care quickly.
- **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](http://www.cdc.gov). The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of District residents. For additional information, please visit <https://dchealth.dc.gov> or call (202) 442-9021