

BOTULISM

PERSONAL HEALTH FACT SHEET

What is Botulism?

Botulism is a severe form of general body paralysis caused by an extremely potent toxin. The toxin is produced when a germ called *Clostridium botulinum* forms spores that germinate under special conditions. These conditions are:

- In improperly preserved food that contains the toxin, usually food canned at home.
- A wound contaminated with *Cl. Botulinum*
- Infants and immunocompromised adults who consume spores that then live in the intestine and produce toxin

All three forms of botulism are very rare. The toxin is easily destroyed by boiling for at least 10 minutes, but the spores may survive high temperatures.

How is it spread?

Foodborne botulism cases are usually associated with improper home canning of fruits and vegetables, with occasional meat-related canning cases. It is not spread from person-to-person.

How is it treated?

A botulism antitoxin is available but must be used early, before the toxin has bound itself to nerves, in order to be helpful. The diagnosis is usually confirmed by a special lab test. It may be possible to culture the *Cl. Botulinum* in stool specimens from suspect cases, or find the toxin itself in stool samples.

Even suspect botulism is required by law in most states to be reported to public health departments, which in turn carry out investigations to help confirm the diagnosis and identify any other persons at risk, as well as identify suspect foods.

How can we prevent Botulism?

In an outbreak situation, officials may decide to administer antitoxin or immune globulin to those exposed. Foodborne botulism can be prevented by adhering to strict food handling and preservation guidelines, as found at both www.cdc.gov and www.uga.edu/nchfp/index.html. Avoidance of bulging cans or foods with unusual odors is recommended. Infant botulism can often be prevented by not feeding honey or corn syrup to infants under 12 months old. Persons using injectible street drugs are at increased risk for wound botulism.

SYMPTOMS OF BOTULISM

Symptoms of foodborne botulism begin between 6 hours and 2 weeks after consumption of the toxin, beginning with blurred or double vision and difficulty speaking/swallowing/crying, proceeding to a descending paralysis.

Patients may need respiratory support for weeks or months, but most eventually recover. Death, although rare, is usually caused by respiratory paralysis.

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