

MANAGING YOUR BOTULISM

What Is Botulism?

Botulism is a disease caused by toxins (poisons) that are produced by a bacteria named *Clostridium botulinum*. These bacteria occur widely in soils and grow from spores (the resting stage) only in the right conditions. The three types of botulism are food related, wound related, and infant botulism. In the United States, an average of 110 cases are reported yearly. Of these, about 25% are related to the food type, 72% to the infant type, and 3% to the wound type.

What Causes Botulism?

The bacteria produce seven toxins (labeled A through G). Types A, B, E, and F cause disease in humans, in people of all ages. Botulism cannot be transmitted from person to person.

People get food-borne botulism from eating food containing the toxin. A common cause is improperly preserved home-processed foods.

Wound botulism is most often related to illegal drug use and to crush injuries. Spores contaminate a wound and produce toxin that gets into the bloodstream.

Infants can eat spores, which then grow in the intestines and produce toxin.

What Are the Symptoms of Botulism?

First symptoms are drooping eyelids, blurred vision, double vision, slurred speech, difficulty swallowing, dry mouth, and muscle weakness. Most symptoms start 12 to 36 hours after eating tainted foods. If the disease isn't diagnosed and treated early, it may lead to paralysis of arms, legs, trunk, and breathing muscles. People may need a mechanical ventilator to help their breathing.

About 5% to 10% of people with food-borne botulism die.

How Is Botulism Diagnosed?

Botulism has symptoms similar to those of other neurological diseases, so diagnosis is difficult and it is often misdiagnosed. Laboratory tests to prove it can take up to 4 days to complete, and only certain laboratories can do them.

How Is Botulism Treated?

The health care provider treats botulism by checking and observing symptoms, providing supportive care, and giving an antitoxin (a chemical to counteract the toxin). The antitoxin slows the paralysis and may also make the symptoms less severe and stop them sooner.

DOs and DON'Ts in Managing Botulism

- ✓ **DO** realize that most outbreaks are related to eating home-canned foods, especially vegetables. Avoid eating contaminated food. You can get instructions on safe home canning from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.
- ✓ **DO** understand that the toxin is destroyed by high temperatures. Boil foods for at least 10 minutes.
- ✓ **DO** realize that infant botulism occurs when an infant eats spores of the bacteria. Many cases have occurred after eating contaminated honey.
- ✓ **DO** keep all wounds clean. Proper wound care and avoiding illegal drug use reduces your risk of getting wound botulism.
- ✓ **DO** call your health care provider if you have trouble breathing or swallowing or note muscle weakness, double vision, or slurred speech.
- ✓ **DO** call your health care provider if you have a contaminated wound.

⊗ **DON'T** do drugs to minimize the risk of wound botulism!

⊗ **DON'T** forget that botulism is not spread from one person to another.

FROM THE DESK OF

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact the following source:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Tel: (800) 232-4636; Website:
<http://www.bt.cdc.gov>

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