

Botulism

Botulism is a rare but serious illness caused by a nerve toxin made by the bacterium, *Clostridium botulinum*. A toxin is a poison that is released by some bacteria and viruses.

There are three types of botulism: food, wound and infant botulism.

All forms of botulism can be fatal and are considered medical emergencies.

How do you get botulism?

Eating food that has the botulism toxin causes foodborne botulism. It often involves improperly processed home canned foods. Botulism in infants under one year of age has been associated with the intake of contaminated honey. Wound botulism occurs when *Clostridium botulinum* spores contaminate a wound and produce toxin.

How is botulism spread?

A person must eat contaminated food that has not been properly canned, cooked or reheated after the bacteria have produced the toxin. Person-to-person spread does not occur.

What are the symptoms of botulism?

Foodborne and infant botulism produce symptoms that affect the nervous system. The classic symptoms of botulism include double vision, blurred vision, drooping eyelids, slurred speech, difficulty swallowing, dry mouth and muscle weakness that goes down the body, first the shoulders, than upper arms, lower arms, thighs, calves, and feet. If untreated these symptoms may progress to paralysis. Infants with botulism appear lethargic, feed poorly, are constipated, and have a weak cry and poor muscle tone.

Can botulism be used as a bioweapon?

Yes. Botulism toxin has been developed as an aerosol weapon by several countries. If botulism were used as a bioweapon, people would likely become infected with the toxin by breathing it, or by drinking contaminated water.

How soon after exposure would symptoms develop?

Symptoms generally begin 12-36 hours after eating contaminated food, but may occur as early as a few hours and as late as 10 days.

Can I spread this to my family?

No, botulism can not be spread from person-to-person. However, a person can be exposed to botulism by breathing in the toxin if it is intentionally released into the air (this does not occur naturally).

What is the treatment?

The symptoms of botulism make hospitalization necessary. If diagnosed early, foodborne and wound botulism can be treated with an antitoxin which blocks the action of the toxin circulating in the blood. This can prevent patients from worsening, but recovery still takes many weeks. If left untreated, a patient may need to be on a breathing machine (ventilator) for weeks and would require intensive medical and nursing care. Currently antitoxin is not usually given in cases of infant botulism.

If I develop symptoms, what do I do?

If you should develop any of the symptoms listed here, please contact your physician or your local hospital immediately for evaluation. Please keep any contaminated food for testing.

Can botulism be prevented?

All canned and preserved foods should be properly processed and prepared. Bulging containers should not be opened and foods with an unusual smell should not be eaten or even tasted. Canned food with bulging lids should be thrown away. Identified sources of infant botulism, such as honey, should not be fed to infants.

Kalamazoo County Health & Community Services

3299 Gull Road; PO Box 42

Nazareth, MI 49074-0042

Phone: 269-373-5200 Fax: 269-373-5363

Web: www.kalcounty.com

Emergency Hotline: 269-373-5300