

What You Should Know About Botulism

WHAT IS BOTULISM?

Botulism is a rare, muscle-paralyzing disease caused by a toxin made by *Clostridium botulinum* (*C. botulinum*), a bacteria found naturally in the soil. There are three main types of botulism: *foodborne*, *infant*, and *wound*. Botulism toxin could be used as a biological weapon because it can be breathed in or swallowed.

HOW IS BOTULISM SPREAD? WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

- ❖ You can get botulism from eating contaminated food or when a wound is contaminated by the bacteria. The disease is **not** spread from person to person. The amount of exposure to the toxin determines how quickly symptoms appear—from a few hours to several days.
- ❖ Regardless of how the toxin enters the body, the results are the same. As the disease progresses, symptoms may include double or blurred vision, drooping eyelids, slurred speech, difficulty swallowing, dry mouth, and muscle weakness (starts with shoulders and descends through the body). Finally, breathing muscles may be paralyzed causing death unless mechanical breathing assistance is available.
- ❖ **Foodborne botulism** occurs when a person eats food contaminated with the toxin-producing bacteria. This usually results from poor homecanning techniques. The first symptoms may include nausea and

vomiting. Foodborne botulism can occur in all age groups. The source of the contaminated food must be identified as quickly as possible to prevent others from becoming ill.

- ❖ **Infant botulism** occurs in a small number of infants each year who have *C. botulinum* bacteria in their intestinal tracts.
- ❖ **Wound botulism** occurs when wounds are infected with *C. botulinum*, for example, when a wound is contaminated during an outdoor injury by contact with contaminated soil. The bacteria can only infect damaged skin.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- ❖ If you have symptoms, please consult a healthcare provider as soon as possible. If you believe you have been intentionally exposed to botulism, you should contact law enforcement officials immediately.
- ❖ There is no vaccine to prevent botulism. You can reduce risk of exposure by following safe food handling and cooking practices and by keeping wounds or cuts clean and properly bandaged.

TREATMENT FOR BOTULISM

- ❖ Immediate treatment is essential. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention maintains a supply of antitoxin to treat botulism. This antitoxin can only be obtained by healthcare providers from health departments when botulism is suspected or confirmed. The antitoxin reduces the severity of symptoms if it is given early. Most patients eventually recover.

(Prepared by: WA State Dept of Health and EMD)



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