



# Fact Sheet: Botulism

*This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information contact your health care provider or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov).*

## What is botulism?

Botulism is a rare but serious illness that can lead to paralysis. It is caused by a nerve toxin produced by the bacteria *Clostridium botulinum*. There are three forms of botulism – foodborne, infant, and wound. All forms of botulism can be fatal and are considered medical emergencies. Foodborne botulism can be especially dangerous. Many people can be poisoned by eating contaminated food that contains the spores. Person to person transmission does not occur.

## How do people get infected with botulism?

- Foodborne botulism is caused by eating foods that contain the botulinum toxin which can be found in home-canned, lightly preserved or fermented foods.
- Infant botulism is caused by consuming the spores of the botulinum bacteria, which then grow in the intestines and release toxin.
- Wound botulism is caused by toxin produced from a wound infected with botulinum.

## What are the symptoms of botulism?

The first symptoms of botulism may include:  
Skin (cutaneous):

- Double or blurred vision
- Drooping eyelids
- Slurred speech
- Difficulty swallowing
- Dry mouth
- Muscle weakness
- Constipation

If a health care provider cannot identify and treat the illness early, the symptoms can progress to paralysis of the arms, legs, trunk and respiratory system.

Infants with botulism:

- Appear lethargic
- Feed poorly
- Are constipated
- Have a weak cry
- Have poor muscle tone

## How soon do infected people get sick?

In foodborne botulism, symptoms generally begin 12 to 72 hours after ingesting the toxin. However, symptoms can occur as early as 2 hours or as late as 8 days. In wound botulism, the incubation period is generally 4 to 14 days. In infant botulism, the incubation period is estimated to be up to 30 days.

## Can botulism be spread from person to person?

No, botulism is not known to be spread from person to person.

## How is botulism treated?

Intensive medical and nursing care in a hospital is the basis of treatment for all forms of botulism along with giving botulism antitoxin, if diagnosed early. Often a breathing machine (ventilator) is needed to help people breathe until they recover from the neurotoxin exposure. Antibiotics are not routinely used.

## Is there a botulism vaccine?

No, there is not a vaccine for botulism.

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### **How can botulism be prevented?**

Foodborne botulism has often been from home-canned foods with low acid content. People who do home canning should follow procedures to reduce contamination of foods and prevent toxin formation. Proper guidelines are set forth by the US department of Agriculture:

[https://nchfp.uga.edu/publications/publications\\_usda.html](https://nchfp.uga.edu/publications/publications_usda.html)

Proper storage of manufactured food is essential and can prevent growth of the toxin. Consumers should read and follow all recommendations for storage of food products, including temperature and shelf life.

Children less than 12 months old should not be fed honey. Honey can contain botulinum spores. This has been a source of infection for infants.

Wound botulism can be prevented by seeking prompt medical care for infected wounds.

### **Can botulism be used as a weapon?**

The high toxicity of botulinum toxins and the ease of production, transport and delivery make this an agent of bioterrorism concern. Botulism is classified as a Category A agent by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Category A agents are considered the highest threat to national security due to their ease of transmission and high rate of serious illness or death.

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