

# PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

# Botulism



## Burlington County Health Department

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**Public Health**  
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Burlington County Health Department  
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## What is botulism?

Botulism is a rare but serious illness caused by a toxin that attacks the body's nerves and causes difficulty breathing, muscle paralysis, and even death. The bacteria is not usually harmful except in infants and certain individuals. There are 5 main types of botulism:

**Foodborne botulism** is caused by eating foods that contain the botulism toxin. The most frequent source is home-canned foods prepared in an unsafe manner.

**Wound botulism** is caused when a wound is infected with botulism. Injection drug users are at an increased risk of this type of infection.

**Infant botulism** occurs in babies and is caused by consuming spores, which then grow in the intestines.

**Adult intestinal botulism** is very rare and occurs in adults by the same route as infant botulism.

**Latrogenic botulism** can occur if too much botulinum toxin is injected for cosmetic reasons, such as for wrinkles, or medical reason, such as for migraine headaches.

All forms of botulism can be fatal and are considered medical emergencies. Foodborne botulism is a public health emergency because many people can be poisoned by eating contaminated food.

## What are the symptoms of botulism?

Classic symptoms of botulism include double vision, blurred vision, drooping eyes, slurred speech, difficulty swallowing, dry mouth, and muscle weakness. Infants with botulism often appear lethargic, feed poorly, are constipated, have a weak cry, and poor muscle tone.

If untreated, these symptoms may progress and symptoms may worsen to cause paralysis of the respiratory muscles, arms, legs, and trunk (area of body extending from neck to pelvis). In foodborne botulism, symptoms usually begin 18 to 36 hours after eating a contaminated food, but they can appear as early as 6 hours or as late as 10 days.

## How is botulism treated?

Giving the patients history and physical examination are usually not enough to diagnosis botulism. Certain tests may be needed to exclude other diseases to determine if botulism is the cause. These tests include a brain scan, spinal fluid examination, nerve conduction test, and a tensilon test.

Botulism can be treated with an antitoxin which blocks the action of the toxin circulating in the blood. Antitoxins are also available for infants. Doctors may try to remove any contaminated food in the gut by inducing vomiting or using enemas. Wounds should be treated to remove the source of the toxin followed by antibiotics.

Respiratory failure and paralysis that occur with severe cases may require a patient to be on a breathing machine until paralysis improves.

Botulism can result in death if not treated properly. However, in the past 50 years, the number of infected patients who die has fallen from 50% to 5%.

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

*Foodborne botulism* most often comes from improperly home-canned foods, especially those with low acid contents, such as asparagus, green beans, beets, and corn. However, it can grow in almost any canned food environment. It's important to make sure all safety measures are followed when home-canning. You can prevent wound botulism by keeping wounds clean. Infant botulism and adult intestinal colonization is harder to prevent as scientist do not fully understand how a why these populations get those forms of botulism.

### **Where can I get more information?**

- Your doctor, nurse, clinic
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at <http://www.cd.gov>
- The Burlington County Health Department at (609) 265-5548
- The New Jersey Department of Health website at <http://www.nj.gov/health>