



Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CDC 24/7: Saving lives, protecting people, reducing health costs

Emergency Preparedness and Response

Facts about Botulism

Botulism is a muscle-paralyzing disease caused by a toxin made by a bacterium called *Clostridium botulinum*.

There are three main kinds of botulism:

- Foodborne botulism occurs when a person ingests pre-formed toxin that leads to illness within a few hours to days. Foodborne botulism is a public health emergency because the contaminated food may still be available to other persons besides the patient.
- Infant botulism occurs in a small number of susceptible infants each year who harbor *C. botulinum* in their intestinal tract.
- Wound botulism occurs when wounds are infected with *C. botulinum* that secretes the toxin.

With foodborne botulism, symptoms begin within 6 hours to 10 days (most commonly between 12 and 36 hours) after eating food that contains the toxin. Symptoms of botulism include double vision, blurred vision, drooping eyelids, slurred speech, difficulty swallowing, dry mouth, and muscle weakness that moves down the body, usually affecting the shoulders first, then the upper arms, lower arms, thighs, calves, etc. Paralysis of breathing muscles can cause a person to stop breathing and die, unless assistance with breathing (mechanical ventilation) is provided.

Botulism is not spread from one person to another. Foodborne botulism can occur in all age groups.

A supply of antitoxin against infant botulism is maintained by the California Department of Public Health's Infant Botulism Treatment and Prevention Program, and a supply of antitoxin against other kinds of botulism is maintained by CDC. The antitoxin is most effective in reducing the severity of symptoms if administered early in the course of the disease. Most patients eventually recover after weeks to months of supportive care.

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