

BOTULISM

What is it?

Botulism is a rare but serious paralytic disease that is caused by a nerve toxin produced by the bacterium *Clostridium botulinum*. There are three types of botulism. Wound botulism occurs when the bacterium produces the toxin within an open wound. Infant botulism occurs when a child consumes *C. botulinum* spores which will grow in the intestine releasing the toxin. Foodborne botulism is caused by consuming food that contains the toxin.

How is it spread?

Foodborne botulism is spread by the ingestion of food that contains the *Clostridium botulinum* toxin.

Infant botulism commonly occurs when food containing bacterial spores is consumed by infants.

Person to person transmission of botulism does not occur.

Who is at risk?

All age groups are at risk for foodborne botulism.

Infants under the age of one are susceptible to infant botulism.

Signs and symptoms of illness

Foodborne botulism- Early symptoms are fatigue, weakness, headache and vertigo. These symptoms are followed by blurred vision, dry mouth, and difficulty swallowing and speaking. Vomiting, diarrhoea, constipation and abdominal swelling may occur.

Infant botulism- Lethargy, feed poorly, constipation and baby may have a weak cry and muscle tone.

If a person is not treated, symptoms can progress and cause paralysis to limbs and even respiratory muscles causing death.

How long before illness starts?

Symptoms generally appear 12 to 36 hours after ingesting contaminated food but may show up as early as 6 hours or as late as 10 days after ingestion.

How long does the illness last?

Illness can last for weeks to months. If respiratory failure and paralysis have occurred a patient may be required to stay on ventilator for weeks with intensive medical care.

If diagnosed early, an antitoxin can be given to prevent a patient with foodborne botulism from worsening but recovery could still take weeks.

Prevention

Foodborne botulism has often been attributed to home-canned foods that have a low acid content such as green beans, beans and asparagus. Outbreaks have also been linked to less

common sources such as tomatoes, carrot juice, baked potatoes left in foil after cooking and garlic in oil. When a person is home canning they should follow strict hygienic procedures to eliminate contamination of the food. The botulism toxin is destroyed by high temperatures so proper heating methods should be used. Instructions for proper home-canning can be obtained by contacting the Health Unit or reviewing the links provided below.

<http://foodsafety.psu.edu/canningguide.html>

<http://www.homecanning.com>

Infant botulism can be prevented by not feeding children under the age of one syrup or honey.

For more information on common foodborne illness or to speak with a Public Health Inspector, call the Peterborough County-City Health Unit at 705-743-1000.