



# QUICK FACTS ABOUT....

## *Botulism*

### **What is Botulism?**

Botulism is a very serious disease caused by a toxin (poison) made by *Clostridium botulinum* bacteria, which live in the soil and grow best with very little air. These bacteria form spores, which allow them to survive harsh environments. The toxin causes paralysis which can make a person stop breathing. Botulism can cause death and is a medical emergency.

### **How is Botulism spread?**

You can get botulism three different ways:

- Eating foods that contain botulism toxin (especially improperly home-canned foods);
- Babies who eat certain foods such as honey or natural syrups that contain spores of botulism bacteria, which grow in the body and produce toxin; and
- Wounds infected with botulism bacteria.

**NOTE: Botulism is not spread from person-to-person.**

### **What are the symptoms of Botulism?**

- Double vision or blurred vision
- Drooping eyelids
- Difficulty speaking or swallowing
- Dry mouth
- Weakness
- Paralyzed arms, legs, and chest

Symptoms of botulism begin six hours to ten days after exposure to contaminated food or after a wound is infected with the bacteria. Babies with botulism appear tired, don't feed well, are constipated, and have a weak cry and limp muscles. These are symptoms of the muscle paralysis caused by the bacterial toxin.

## **How do I know if I have Botulism?**

You cannot tell without seeing your doctor. Your doctor may order tests to rule out other diseases, and may collect a stool (bowel movement) or blood sample.

## **How is Botulism treated?**

A person who has breathing failure or is paralyzed needs intensive medical care in a hospital. The paralysis slowly improves after several weeks. If discovered early, botulism obtained from food and wound botulism can be treated with an antitoxin. The antitoxin keeps the illness from becoming worse but does not speed recovery. Antitoxin is not used to treat babies with botulism.

## **Are there complications from Botulism?**

People can die from botulism poisoning because of breathing failure. Someone with severe botulism may need a breathing machine and medical care for several months. Those who survive botulism poisoning may have tiredness and shortness of breath for years.

## **How can Botulism be prevented?**

- People who do home canning should follow very clean methods to reduce contamination of food and carefully follow home-canning instructions. Instructions for safe home canning are available from county extension services or the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).
- Since the bacterial toxin is destroyed by heat, people who eat home canned foods should boil the food for 10 minutes before eating it.
- Never eat foods in cans or jars that are bulging, discolored, or have swollen lids or caps.
- If the can or jar looks normal but the food has a bad taste or smell, do not eat it.
- Potatoes that have been baked wrapped in aluminum foil should be kept hot until they are eaten or refrigerated. If leftovers are kept overnight, remove the foil from the potatoes before storing.
- Oils with garlic or herbs in them should be refrigerated.
- Do not feed honey to babies less than twelve months old. Honey can contain spores of the bacteria, which can easily grow in infants.
- Carefully clean and disinfect all cuts and wounds, especially if they are dirty. See your doctor immediately if the injury is infected.
- Do not use injectable street drugs.

### *References:*

[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)  
[Indiana State Department of Health](#)