



# PUBLIC FACT SHEET

## BOTULISM

### What is botulism?

Botulism is a rare, muscle-paralyzing illness caused by a nerve poison that is produced by specific bacteria. There are three main forms of botulism: foodborne, wound infection, and intestinal (infant).

All forms of this illness may cause death and are considered a medical emergency.

### How common is botulism?

The United States reports an average of 110 cases of botulism each year. Of these, approximately 25% are foodborne, 72% are intestinal botulism, and 3% are wound botulism.

### How is botulism spread?

Botulism may be spread through the following ways:

- Foodborne
  - contaminated foods
  - incorrectly prepared food, including home-canned food
- Wound Infection
  - growth of the botulism bacteria in a wound
  - injecting drug users
- Intestinal (infant)
  - consumption of food containing spores that grow in the intestine and release botulism poison

Botulism could also be used as a weapon of bioterrorism by making the bacteria airborne.

Person to person spread of botulism does not occur.

### What are possible symptoms?

General symptoms of the disease:

- double vision
- blurred vision
- slurred speech
- difficulty swallowing
- dry mouth
- muscle weakness or paralysis

*Foodborne Botulism:* First signs usually occur with 18 to 36 hrs, but may occur as early as 6 hours or as late as 14 day.

*Intestinal (infant) Botulism:* Infants may appear tired, eat poorly, be constipated, and have a weak cry and limp muscles.

### How is botulism diagnosed?

Botulism is detected through a patient's blood or stool sample, and by laboratory identification of infected food.

### What is the treatment for botulism?

In the early stage of the illness doctors can treat botulism with an antitoxin, which blocks the action of the poison in the blood.

However, some patients may need to be on a breathing machine for weeks, along with intensive medical and nursing care.

### For more information on botulism contact:

Ottawa County Health Department  
[www.miOttawa.org](http://www.miOttawa.org)

Center for Disease Control and Prevention  
[www.bt.cdc.gov/agent/botulism/](http://www.bt.cdc.gov/agent/botulism/)  
Phone: (888) 246-2675