

# Botulism

# FACTSHEET

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH  
Division of Epidemiology, Disease Surveillance and Investigation  
899 N. Capitol Street, NE, Suite 580  
Washington, D.C. 20002  
202-442-9371 Fax 202-442-8060  
[www.dchealth.dc.gov](http://www.dchealth.dc.gov)

## What is Botulism?

Botulism is a rare, but serious bacterial disease that causes muscle paralysis. There are three main kinds of botulism:

- Foodborne botulism is caused by eating foods that contain the toxin (poison) produced by the botulism germ
- Wound botulism is caused by the wound being infected with the toxin (poison) from the germ that causes botulism
- Infant botulism is caused by consuming the toxin (poison) from the germ, which then grows in the intestines and produces more of the toxin.

All three types are extremely serious, are medical emergencies and can be fatal.

## Who gets Botulism?

Foodborne botulism occurs most commonly in persons who have eaten improperly prepared home-canned foods. Infant botulism occurs in children usually less than one year of age and has been associated with honey. Wound botulism has been associated with chronic drug abusers or wounds contaminated with soil or gravel.

## What are the symptoms of Botulism?

The symptoms of botulism include double vision, blurred vision, drooping eyelids, slurred speech, difficulty swallowing, dry mouth, and muscle weakness. Infants with botulism appear lethargic (lacking energy and activity) eat poorly, constipation, have a weak cry, and have poor muscle tone.

## How is Botulism spread?

Humans can become infected with botulism by eating food that has been contaminated with the toxin of the bacteria. This usually occurs from inadequate heating during preservation followed by inadequate cooking. Home canned fruits and vegetables cause most foodborne botulism, meat is rarely a source. Botulism **is not** spread from one person to another.

## How soon do symptoms appear?

In foodborne botulism, symptoms generally begin 12 to 36 hours after eating a contaminated food, but they can occur as early as six hours or as late as 10 days.

## Is a person with Botulism contagious?

No, botulism cannot be spread from one person to another.

## How is Botulism treated?

Hospital care is necessary. A special medication, antitoxin, is given in certain cases of foodborne botulism.

## How can Botulism be prevented?

Botulism can be prevented by the following:

- Appropriate processing and preparation of commercially canned and preserved foods
- Bulging containers should not be opened
- Those that perform home canning and preserving should know the proper time, pressure, and temperature required to destroy the bacteria
- Foods with strange odors should not be eaten or even tasted
- Commercial cans with bulging lids should be returned unopened to the store
- Do not feed children under the age of 1 year old honey

## Want more information?

Information about Botulism and other related health topics can be found at the website [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov). The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please call 202-442-9371.

Revised 09-04

