

FACT SHEET: 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. This leads to illness within a few hours to days. Contaminated food may still be available to other persons and should be reported to public health officials immediately.

Infant botulism occurs in a small number of susceptible infants who harbor the bacteria in their intestinal tract.

Wound botulism occurs when wounds are infected with the bacteria that secretes the toxin.

Transmission:

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

Symptoms:

Symptoms of botulism include double vision, drooping eyelids, slurred speech, difficulty swallowing, dry mouth, muscle weakness that descends through the body: first the shoulders are affected, then the upper arms, lower arms, thighs, calves, etc. Paralysis of breathing muscles can cause a person to stop breathing, unless assistance with breathing is provided.

Incubation Period:

Symptoms begin within 6 hours to 2 weeks (most commonly between 12 and 36 hours) after eating toxin-containing food.

Management:

An antitoxin to botulism is 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.

Any suspected cases of botulism should be reported immediately to local public health officials and treatment sought at the local emergency department.