

# FACT SHEET

# Botulism

## What is botulism?

Botulism is a rare but serious illness caused by a toxin that attacks the body's nerves and causes difficulty breathing, muscle paralysis, and death. This dangerous toxin is produced when a germ called *Clostridium botulinum* forms protective spores that germinate under special conditions.

## How is botulism spread?

There are several kinds of botulism that are spread in different ways. Foodborne botulism is caused by eating improperly preserved food (usually food canned at home). Wound botulism can happen when a tissue wound becomes contaminated with spores. Infants can become ill with botulism by consuming spores that then live in the intestine and produce toxin. Iatrogenic botulism is caused when too much botulinum toxin is injected for cosmetic reasons (to reduce wrinkles) or for medical reasons (to treat migraine headaches).

## What are the symptoms?

- Vision changes
- Difficulty breathing
- Muscle weakness
- Drooping eyelids
- Difficulty moving the eyes
- Difficulty swallowing and speaking
- Descending paralysis

## How can botulism be prevented?

Practice safe food canning practices. A guide to home canning can be found at: <https://nchfp.uga.edu/>.

Keep wounds clean and dry. If a wound appears to be infected, seek medical treatment.

Be sure to get any botulism injections by a licensed practitioner.

## How is botulism treated?

A botulism antitoxin is available but must be used early, before the toxin has bound itself to nerves, in order to be helpful. Antitoxin does not heal the damage the toxin has already done. Depending on how severe your symptoms are, you may need to stay in the hospital for weeks or even months before you are well enough to go home.

*This fact sheet is for informational purposes only and is not intended for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information contact your health care provider or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov).*

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