

Botulism Quicksheet

December 2025

Background

Botulism is a rare but serious illness caused by a nerve toxin made by *Clostridium botulinum* bacteria. The toxin causes muscle paralysis and can be life-threatening.

There are three main types of Botulism:

- Foodborne Botulism – from eating food containing the toxin
- Wound Botulism – from toxin produced in an infected wound
- Infant Botulism – from bacteria growing in an infant's intestines

Symptoms

Symptoms usually appear 18-36 hours after exposure (can range from 6 hours-10 days)

General Symptoms

- Double or blurred vision
- Drooping eyelids
- Slurred speech
- Difficulty swallowing
- Dry mouth
- Muscle weakness

Infant Symptoms

- Lethargy
- Poor feeding
- Constipation
- Weak cry
- Poor muscle tone ("floppy baby")

If untreated, these symptoms may progress to cause paralysis of the arms, legs, trunk and respiratory muscles. The paralysis that occurs with botulism can progress very rapidly.

Who Is at Risk?

- Home canners who do not use proper canning methods
- People who eat improperly preserved or stored foods
- Individuals with deep or contaminated wounds
- People who use injectable street drugs
- Infants under 12 months
- Anyone who eats foods stored in low-oxygen environments that are not handled safely

How It Spreads

Botulism does **NOT** spread person-to-person

Foodborne Botulism spreads by:

- Eating improperly home-canned foods
- Eating garlic or herbs in oil stored improperly
- Eating foil-wrapped baked potatoes left at room temperature
- Eating home-fermented or home-canned fish

Wound Botulism spreads by:

- *C. botulinum* entering a deep or contaminated wound
- Use of injectable street drugs

Infant Botulism spreads by:

- Babies ingesting spores, often from honey or environmental dust (honey is safe after 12 months)

Prevention

Food Safety

- Use approved home-canning methods
- Boil home-canned foods for 10 minutes before eating
- Refrigerate garlic/herbs-in-oil mixtures
- Keep foil-wrapped baked potatoes hot until served or refrigerate immediately
- Store foods properly and avoid swollen or leaking cans

Wound Safety

- Seek care for infected wounds

Infant Safety

- Do NOT give honey to infants under 12 months

When to Seek Medical Care

Seek immediate care if you or someone else develops:

- Vision problems (double or blurred) or drooping eyelids
- Trouble speaking, swallowing, or breathing
- Muscle weakness spreading to arms, legs, or trunk
- Infants: poor feeding, constipation, weak cry, or floppy muscles