

Botulism General Information

What is botulism?

Botulism is a rare but serious illness that affects the nervous system. It is caused by a poison made by the bacteria *Clostridium botulinum*. It can enter the body from

- Eating contaminated food – food-borne botulism and intestinal (or infant) botulism
- Contaminating an open wound – wound botulism, when the toxin enters an open wound from soil or gravel or a contaminated injection drug needle
- Injecting too much botox – iatrogenic botulism from excess therapeutic botulinum toxin

Who can get botulism?

Anyone, but most cases come from home-canned foods. Home canning must be done with care. Botulism bacteria spores are common. They grow into a poison when conditions are moist with low oxygen and low acid. Some stored foods are known to grow the bacteria spores, like leftover baked potatoes stored in aluminum foil. Cooking foods with high heat can kill the bacteria. Honey can be contaminated with spores, but only infants are known to get sick from eating honey. Botulism is not spread from person to person.

What are the symptoms?

Early symptoms of botulism:

- blurred or double vision
- weakness
- poor reflexes
- difficulty in swallowing or speaking
- shortness of breath

The illness can progress to complete paralysis, respiratory failure, and death.

When symptoms usually occur:

- within 12–72 hours or longer for food-borne botulism – eating poisoned foods
- about 3–30 days for infant botulism – spores growing into poison in the intestines

What is the treatment?

Treatment requires hospital care for both infants and adults. Some adults may be treated with botulism antitoxin. Untreated botulism can result in death.

How can you prevent botulism?

- Prepare home-canned foods safely. Learn more on the [Nova Scotia Environment](#) and [Health Canada](#) websites.
- Never feed honey to an infant under one year old.
- Discard bulging food containers – do not even open them.
- Never eat or taste foods that look or smell off.