



# Atlantic County Division of Public Health

## Questions and Answers about Botulism

### **What is botulism?**

Botulism is a severe intoxication or food poisoning resulting from the ingestion of an extremely potent toxin produced by the bacteria *Clostridium botulinum*. Infant botulism results from the ingestion of the bacteria or bacterial spores and subsequent production of the toxin in the infant's intestinal tract. Both forms are rare.

### **Who can get botulism?**

Anybody is susceptible to foodborne botulism. Infant botulism is most frequently seen before the age of six months, but all infants are susceptible.

### **How is botulism spread?**

Foodborne botulism is usually acquired through the ingestion of toxin in foods which were not properly canned or preserved and which were not adequately cooked or reheated before eating. Most cases in the United States are due to home-canned fruits and vegetables. Infants can develop botulism through the ingestion of food contaminated with the bacterial spores, which then produce the toxin in the gastrointestinal tract. Although safe for children and adults, honey should not be fed to infants. However, most cases of infant botulism cannot be traced to a particular food item. Person-to-person spread does not occur.

### **What are the symptoms of botulism?**

Botulism produces symptoms that affect the nervous system. The symptoms of foodborne botulism include blurred or double vision, weakness or paralysis, poor reflexes, difficulty swallowing and speaking and difficulty breathing. Infant botulism has a wide range of symptoms, including constipation, difficulty breathing, visual disturbances, poor feeding, weakness and poor reflexes. Infants with botulism are sometimes described as "floppy" and typically cry weakly.

### **How is botulism diagnosed?**

The diagnosis is made by demonstrating the toxin in blood, stool, or the "suspected" food. Infant botulism can also be diagnosed by growing the bacteria, *Clostridium botulinum*, from an infant's stool.

### **How soon after infection do symptoms appear?**

Symptoms of foodborne botulism usually occur 12-36 hours after ingestion, but may take several days. The incubation period for infant botulism is not known.

### **What is the treatment for botulism?**

Supportive care in a hospital is almost always necessary. If antitoxin is given early in the course of foodborne botulism, it can be life-saving. Antitoxin is not used to treat infant botulism; however, the use of intravenous antibodies against the botulinum toxin may be effective in treating infants. Untreated botulism may result in death.

### **How can botulism be prevented?**

Recognized sources of infant botulism, such as honey, should not be fed to infants. All canned and preserved foods should be properly processed and prepared. Bulging containers should not be opened and foods with off-odors should not be eaten or even tasted. Commercial cans with bulging lids should be returned unopened to the vendor.

For more information, call the Atlantic County Division of Public Health at 609-645-5935.