

# Botulism

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## What is Botulism?

Botulism is a severe illness caused by a toxin (poison). The illness affects the nervous system and can be fatal. The toxin is produced by bacteria that may grow in improperly processed, canned or low-acid foods.

## How do I get Botulism?

You must ingest (swallow or eat) the botulism toxin to become sick. Botulism is usually spread through the following:

- Most foodborne botulism cases come from eating canned foods that were not prepared properly or have been damaged. Most cases come from home-canned foods, but damaged cans from any source should be avoided.
- The botulism toxin can also be found in baked potatoes wrapped in foil that were left at moderate temperatures for too long and fresh garlic in oil products that are not stored in the refrigerator.
- Honey may contain botulism spores that can cause illness in children under one year of age.
- Botulism is **NOT** spread from one person to another.

## Symptoms

Symptoms usually begin 12-36 hours after ingesting the food containing the toxin. Symptoms include:

- Blurred or double vision
- Difficulty swallowing and dry mouth
- Vomiting, constipation or diarrhea (for some people)
- May lead to paralysis, respiratory failure, and possibly death

## Prevention

- People who can foods at home should take extra care to ensure proper sanitation and temperature control during the process. Recipes published after 1998 contain the safest canning procedures.
- Boil home canned foods before eating. Boiling food for at least 10 minutes, and stirring occasionally, will destroy the botulism toxin.
- Do not buy cans that are dented or bulging, especially if the damage is near a seal or seam on the can.
- Do not feed honey to children under one year of age.
- Baked potatoes wrapped in foil should be kept hot until eaten or refrigerated.
- Fresh garlic in oil, crushed red pepper in oil and herbs in oil products should be refrigerated.

## Treatment of Botulism

If you think you have botulism – seek medical attention immediately. Early treatment with antitoxin can make the illness less severe. Even with treatment, it can take months or even years to completely recover from botulism.



**Tri-County Health  
Department**

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