



# Botulism

## Definition

Botulism is a serious, potentially fatal illness. It is caused by a nerve toxin produced by *Clostridium botulinum* bacteria. Botulism is always considered a medical emergency. It can cause death by paralyzing the muscles used to breathe.

## Transmission

Botulism cannot be passed from one person to another. People can get botulism in different ways:

- **Foodborne botulism** – eating food contaminated with the toxin (e.g., home-canned foods)
- **Wound botulism** – wound becomes contaminated with dirt containing bacteria spores or by injecting drugs
- **Infant botulism** – when an infant ingests something that contains spores of the bacteria (e.g., honey)
- **Iatrogenic botulism** – person is given too much botulinum toxin (e.g., for cosmetic or medical purposes)

## Signs & Symptoms

Symptoms of botulism are the same, regardless of how people get it. They include double vision, blurred vision, drooping eyelids, slurred speech, difficulty swallowing, dry mouth, and muscle weakness. Infants with botulism can appear drowsy, feed poorly, become constipated, and have a weak cry and poor muscle tone. These are all symptoms of the muscle paralysis caused by the toxin. Without treatment, people with botulism may go on to develop paralysis of the arms, legs, trunk, and the muscles used for breathing.

## Diagnosis

Diagnosis is made by clinical symptoms and laboratory confirmation.

## Role of School Nurse

- **Prevention** – food-related botulism can be prevented through careful food-handling practices – home-canned foods are a special source of concern. Wound botulism can be prevented by promptly seeking medical care for infected wounds and by not using injectable street drugs
- **Treatment Recommendations** – intensive supportive care in a hospital is the primary treatment for all forms of botulism
- **Exclusions** – no exclusions apply to this condition as it is not passed from one person to another
- **Reporting Requirements** – suspect botulism should be reported immediately to 800-821-5821

## Resources

- CDC Botulism website: <https://www.cdc.gov/botulism/>
- Infant Botulism Treatment and Prevention Program, Division of Communicable Disease Control, California Department of Public Health website: <http://www.infantbotulism.org/>
- University of Maine Cooperative Extension County Offices website: <http://extension.umaine.edu/county-offices/>