

# B O T U L I S M

## What is botulism?

Botulism is a rare but serious paralytic illness caused by a nerve toxin that is produced by the bacterium *Clostridium botulinum*. There are three main kinds of botulism.

- **Food borne botulism** is caused by eating foods that contain the botulism toxin.
- **Wound botulism** is caused by toxin produced from a wound infected with *Clostridium botulinum*.
- **Infant botulism** is caused by consuming the spores of the botulinum bacteria, which then grow in the intestines and release toxin.
- All forms of botulism can be fatal and are considered medical emergencies.

## What are the symptoms of botulism?

- The classic symptoms of botulism include double vision, blurred vision, drooping eyelids, slurred speech, difficulty swallowing, dry mouth, and muscle weakness.
- Infants with botulism appear lethargic, feed poorly, are constipated, and have a weak cry and poor muscle tone. These are all symptoms of the muscle paralysis caused by the bacterial toxin.
- If untreated, these symptoms may progress to cause paralysis of the arms, legs, trunk and respiratory muscles.
- In food borne botulism, symptoms generally begin 18 to 36 hours after eating a contaminated food.

## How is botulism diagnosed?

- Physicians may consider the diagnosis if the patient's history and physical

examination suggest botulism. However, these clues are usually not enough to allow a diagnosis. These tests may include a brain scan, spinal fluid examination, nerve conduction test (electromyography, or EMG), and a tensilon test for myasthenia gravis.

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