



Public Health
Prevent. Promote. Protect.

HOCKING COUNTY HEALTH **DEPARTMENT**

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With the recent events in Fairfield County, the topic of botulism has been in the media quite a bit lately. First, botulism is a rare but serious paralytic illness caused by a nerve toxin that is produced by the bacterium *Clostridium botulinum*. Botulism is NOT contagious. You cannot catch botulism from someone infected with the bacteria. Individuals can only get botulism by consuming the botulinum toxin or by having a wound infected with the toxin producing bacterium. However, foodborne botulism is a public health concern because many people can be poisoned by eating a contaminated food product.

Although extremely dangerous, botulism is also very rare. According to the CDC, an average of 145 cases of botulism are reported in the United States each year. Approximately 15% are foodborne, 65% are infant botulism, and 20% are wound related. Most years, cases involving two or more persons occur and are usually caused by home-canned foods. Also, most wound botulism cases are associated with injection drug use of black-tar heroin.

Typical symptoms of botulism poisoning include double vision, blurred vision, dropping 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. If someone is not treated, these symptoms may progress to paralysis of the respiratory muscles, arms, legs, and trunk. Foodborne botulism symptoms usually begin eighteen to thirty six hours after eating a contaminated food, but they can occur as early as six hours or as late as ten days.

Botulism can be treated with an antitoxin which blocks the action of the toxins in the blood. If the antitoxin is given before paralysis is complete, it can prevent the condition from getting worse and can shorten recovery time. If respiratory failure and paralysis occur, the patient may need to be on a breathing machine for weeks or months and receive intensive medical care. Wounds infected with *Clostridium botulinum* should be treated to remove the bacteria. This usually involves surgery.

Next week, preventing botulism poisoning through proper food safety and home-canning will be discussed. In the meantime, if you have any questions about botulism or food safety, please feel free to call the Hocking County Health Department at 740-385-3030 to speak with a nurse or sanitarian.