

BOTULISM

Polk County Preparations

Because of ongoing concerns about potential terrorist attacks, the U.S. government is working to improve overall preparation against terrorism. One aspect of preparation is to learn more about protecting ourselves against possible attacks with biological agents.

If a public health emergency happens in our community, the Polk County Public Health Department will be the local agency responsible for preparing and guiding medical response and public information efforts. During such an emergency, a critical role of the Public Health Department will be to work with other local first responders, such as fire and police. The Public Health Department will also coordinate response activities with state and federal agencies.

The Polk County Public Health Department is providing this information to help you understand what botulism is and what response you may be asked to take in the unlikely event that you would be exposed to the agent that causes botulism.

What is Botulism?

Botulism is a disease caused by a nerve toxin that is produced by the bacterium *clostridium botulinum*. While botulism is rare, all forms can cause serious illness that can result in paralysis and even death. There are three main kinds of botulism:

Food-borne botulism is caused by eating foods that contain the botulism toxin. Outbreaks of food-borne botulism of two or more people happen almost every year. Eating contaminated canned foods usually causes these cases.

Wound botulism is caused when wounds are infected with the botulism bacteria. Wound botulism has increased in recent years because of the use of black-tar heroin, especially in California.

Infant botulism is caused by swallowing the bacteria. It grows in the intestines and releases the toxin into the body.

Botulism and Bioterrorism

It may be possible for a terrorist to use the botulism toxin to contaminate food supplies. The toxin may also be spread through the air as an aerosol or spray, but most authorities agree that this would be very difficult to do because the botulism toxin decays quickly once it is released into the environment. Botulism cannot be spread from person to person.

In the event of a bioterrorist attack with botulism, the Public Health Department and emergency officials will provide emergency information and instructions on how to protect yourself and your family. You may be asked to evacuate (leave the area) or shelter-in-place (remain inside a building). In either case, it is important that you and your family have an Emergency Preparation Plan. Since botulism cannot be spread person to person, instructions will be given to people who were likely exposed to the botulism toxin.

Symptoms of Botulism

Symptoms include double or blurred vision, drooping eyelids, slurred speech, difficulty swallowing, dry mouth, and muscle weakness that moves through the body; first shoulders, then upper arms, lower arms, thighs, calves, etc. The muscle weakness moves into the chest causing a paralysis of the breathing muscles that can stop a person's breathing unless help is provided. With food-borne botulism, symptoms usually begin 18 to 36 hours after eating contaminated food, but they can occur as early as 6 hours or as late as 10 days.

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Treatment for Botulism

The antitoxin for botulism reduces the severity of symptoms if given soon after exposure. If you were exposed to botulism, you would seek medical help immediately. You would receive weeks or months of supportive medical care, which would include fluid replacement, nutrition and assisted breathing to help you recover.

If you have any questions about botulism, please contact the **Polk County Health Department at 515-286-3798**. Public Health Department staff members are available to answer your questions Monday to Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

For information about putting together an Emergency Preparation Plan, visit the Department of Homeland Security site at www.ready.gov. Also, see the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Web site at www.bt.cdc.gov for additional information.

