



South Central Public Health District

Prevent. Promote. Protect.

1020 Washington Street N • Twin Falls, ID 83301
(208) 737-5900

BOTULISM (Botulinum Toxin) AS A BIOTERRORISM EVENT

What is Botulism?

The bacteria (germs) that cause botulism release a powerful toxin that causes the muscles to become paralyzed. The bacteria are normally found in the soil and in ocean or lake water sediment or silt. Most people get botulism from eating (ingesting) improperly cooked or preserved food. Airborne botulism does not occur naturally. However, if the toxin is intentionally released into the air, it could be absorbed into the skin and lungs and cause the same symptoms as ingested botulism.

What are the symptoms of botulism?

The early symptoms include blurred vision, double vision, and dry mouth. As the toxin spreads in the body, the symptoms become more intense and include sore throat, trouble speaking and swallowing, droopy eyelids, muscle weakness, and trouble breathing.

How will I know if I was exposed to the toxin that causes botulism?

It will depend on how the toxin was released, and where you were in relation to the release site. The toxin could be released into air or in food or water.

How soon will symptoms of botulism develop (incubation period)?

Normally, the symptoms start within 12-36 hours but the incubation period may be as short as 6 hours or as long as 10 days, depending on how the toxin was released.

Can botulism be spread from person-to-person?

Neither the bacteria nor the poisonous toxin released by the bacteria are spread from person-to-person.

How is botulism treated?

It may become necessary to put a tube in your throat that is attached to a breathing machine (ventilator) to help you breath. You may be paralyzed and require hospitalization for a long time. As time passes, most persons with botulism recover full use of their muscles.

How is botulism prevented?

Natural cases of botulism are rare and typically result from food contamination. All canned and preserved foods should be properly processed and prepared. Bulging containers should not be opened, and foods with off odors should not be eaten or tasted. Commercial cans with bulging lids should be returned unopened to the vendor. If the toxin is released into the air, you may be advised to stay inside and close all the windows and doors.

Where can I get more information?

You can call South Central Public Health District at 734-5900 ext. 239.