

## Fact sheet

# Infant botulism

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### What is infant botulism?

Botulism is a rare but serious condition caused by toxins from bacteria called *Clostridium botulinum*. There are different types of botulism. Infant botulism happens when *Clostridium botulinum* bacterial spores grow in a baby's intestinal tract.

### How is infant botulism spread?

Infant botulism is not contagious, and is not spread from person to person. The source of infant botulism may be honey, but it may be exposure to soil contaminated with the bacteria. An infant must eat the bacterial spores that multiply and produce the toxin in the digestive tract.

### What are the signs and symptoms of infant botulism?

- Constipation (often the first sign)
- Floppy movements due to muscle weakness and trouble controlling the head
- Weak cry
- Irritability
- Drooling
- Drooping eyelids
- Tiredness
- Difficulty sucking or feeding
- Paralysis

### How long after infection do symptoms appear?

Signs and symptoms of infant botulism may begin between 3 and 30 days after the toxin gets into an infant's body. If infant botulism is related to food, such as honey, problems generally begin within 18 to 36 hours after the toxin enters the baby's body.

### Who is most at risk?

Infant botulism typically occurs in babies younger than 6 months of age.

### What type of health problems are caused by infant botulism?

If untreated, illness may cause paralysis of respiratory muscles, arms, and legs. If not treated, death can occur. All types of botulism can be fatal and are medical emergencies. If you or someone you know has symptoms of botulism, get medical help immediately.

### How is infant botulism diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will check for signs of muscle weakness or paralysis, such as drooping eyelids and a weak voice, and ask about the foods your child has eaten in the past few days. In cases of possible infant botulism, your healthcare provider may ask if the child has eaten honey recently and has had constipation or sluggishness. Your healthcare provider may perform additional lab tests on blood, stool or vomit for evidence

of the toxin to help confirm infant botulism. These tests may take days.

### **How is infant botulism treated?**

Hospital care is necessary. A type of antitoxin, known as botulism immune globulin, is used to treat infants. The antitoxin attaches itself to toxin that is still circulating in the bloodstream and helps stop paralysis from progressing. The antitoxin does not reverse paralysis. Antibiotics are not used to treat infants.

### **How can infant botulism be prevented?**

To reduce the risk of botulism, use proper canning techniques and prepare and store food safely. To reduce the risk of infant botulism, avoid giving honey—even a tiny taste—to babies younger than 1 year old.

### **Where can I get more information?**

- Your personal healthcare provider
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#)
- [Utah Department of Health and Human Services](#)