

## Injection Drug Use and Wound Botulism

People who inject illicit drugs have a risk for getting wound botulism, a serious illness that can be life-threatening. Your risk of getting wound botulism increases if you inject illicit drugs, especially black tar heroin, under your skin (“skin popping”) or into your muscle (“muscle popping” or “muscling”).

Wound botulism happens when a germ called *Clostridium botulinum* gets into a wound and makes a toxin. This toxin attacks your body’s nerves, which can make it hard to breathe and can cause muscle weakness and even death. If you get wound botulism, you will need medicine called antitoxin. Even after receiving antitoxin, you might need to stay in the hospital for several weeks or even months before you recover enough to go home.

If you get wound botulism and don’t get medical treatment, you might die. If you have symptoms of wound botulism, see a doctor or go to an emergency room immediately.

## What to Watch For

Symptoms of wound botulism usually appear several days after injecting contaminated drugs rather than immediately.

Some of the symptoms you might have are:

- Double vision, blurred vision, drooping eyelids
- Slurred speech, difficulty swallowing
- A thick-feeling tongue, dry mouth
- Muscle weakness

As the disease gets worse, you may develop more symptoms, such as:

- Difficulty breathing or paralysis

You can get wound botulism even if the injection site doesn’t look infected.

Some symptoms of wound botulism can look like symptoms of opioid overdose, such as slurred speech or inability to talk, weakness, and trouble breathing.

Naloxone, also known as Narcan, can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose if given in time, but it will not reverse the symptoms of botulism. If you or someone you know gets treatment with Naloxone, but still has symptoms of botulism, see a doctor or go to the emergency room immediately.

When you seek medical care, be direct and honest with your medical providers. It can be easy to mistake wound botulism for other, more common illnesses, so if your doctor doesn't know that you inject drugs it will be hard for them to diagnose you correctly right away

## **How injecting heroin can give you botulism**

Every year in the United States, about 20 people are diagnosed with wound botulism. Most get it from skin popping or muscle popping black tar heroin. We don't know how black tar heroin gets contaminated with the germ that causes botulism. Because the germ lives in soil, it might get into heroin when the drug is produced or transported, when it is cut or mixed with other substances, or when it is prepared for use. Works used to prepare or inject contaminated drugs might also spread the botulism germs to anyone who uses it.

### **Key facts:**

- You cannot see the germ that causes botulism. Contaminated drugs do not look different from non-contaminated drugs.
- Cooking heroin will not kill the botulism germ. It takes special conditions to kill this germ.
- You cannot get botulism from another person. It is not contagious. But if you share contaminated heroin or works with another person, both of you might get botulism.

### **How to Stay Safe**

- The only way 100% sure way to prevent wound botulism is to not inject.
- The next best thing is to use safe injection practices, by not sharing needles or works
- We don't know if using safe injection practices can prevent botulism, but injection safety can prevent many other infections, such as HIV and HCV