



Botulism infection in those who inject heroin

Information for people who use heroin

Wound botulism is a rare and very serious bacterial infection. It happens when spores of the botulism bacterium get into the body. These spores can be found in soil. They may also be present in contaminated supplies of street drugs such as heroin.

People who use drugs may become infected through injecting the contaminated drugs into the skin and muscles. The bacterium that causes botulism grows in damaged tissues. It is extremely rare for wound botulism to be spread from one person to another.

Symptoms of wound botulism often begin with blurred vision and difficulty in swallowing and speaking. The disease can go on to lead to further problems with vision, and paralysis. Botulism can be treated, and most people recover.

What to do to reduce the risk of getting botulism:

- There is no way to tell if your supply of heroin (or other drugs) is contaminated.
- Smoking heroin instead of injecting may reduce the risk of wound botulism. However, some infections, such as anthrax, can result from smoking contaminated heroin. Overall smoking heroin is likely to be safer than injecting, but there are still risks.
- If possible try to stop using heroin. Talk to a doctor or someone at a drug service about starting on a prescribed substitute medicine (such as methadone or buprenorphine) and/or other treatment options.
- If you must inject, do not inject into muscle or under the skin: make sure you hit the vein - your blood is better at killing this bacteria than your muscle.
- Don't share needles, syringes, cookers/spoons or other 'works' with other people who use drugs.
- Use as little citric acid as possible to dissolve the heroin. A lot of citric acid can damage the muscle or the body under the skin, and this damage gives bacteria a better chance to grow.
- If you inject more than one type of drug, inject each at a separate place on your body using clean works for each injection. This is important because certain drugs (e.g. cocaine) can reduce the blood supply at the injection site and could give bacteria in heroin a better chance to grow.
- If you get swelling, redness, or pain where you have injected yourself, or pus collects under the skin, you should get a doctor to check it out immediately, especially if the infection seems different to others you may have had in the past.