



Marion County
OREGON
Health & Human Services

ALERT

COPY AND DISTRIBUTE TO CLINIC PROVIDERS

To:
Fax number:

From: Marion County Health & Human Services
Fax number: (503) 566-2920

Date: **2/24/2021**

Regarding: **Wound Botulism**

Phone number for follow-up: (503) 588-5621

Marion County is currently monitoring a 2nd person who is considered a suspect case of wound botulism

While this is not proof of widespread contamination of heroin with *Clostridium botulinum*, we ask that local public health authorities and clinicians stay alert for cases of botulism associated with injection drug use and obtain as much detail as possible on the type and source of drugs used. **Wound botulism is not considered contagious to other people.**

OHA was notified of a case of wound botulism in a resident of Marion County with onset date 2/2/2021. The case reported use of "gunpowder heroin," which is usually brown or dark grey but may also contain white or black specks or look like a powder resembling dried coffee. Due to its increased solubility versus black tar heroin, it is easier to inject.

Los Angeles County Public Health reported six cases of wound botulism between June and October 2020. While this is not proof of widespread contamination of heroin with *Clostridium botulinum*, we ask that local public health authorities and clinicians stay on the alert for cases of botulism associated with injection drug use and obtain as much detail as possible on the type and source of drugs used.

Symptoms of opioid overdose and botulism may overlap, such as slurred speech, inability to talk, weakness, and trouble breathing. It is important to consider the diagnosis of botulism in persons treated with naloxone for an overdose who do not fully recover.

The majority of botulism cases occur in infants. Since 2016, Oregon has averaged three adult cases of botulism a year. Oregon's last case of adult wound botulism was reported from Deschutes County in 2018.

Provider Actions Requested

- Be alert for possible cases of wound botulism.
- Not all IDU-associated wound botulism patients present with a visible abscess or wound. The initial presentation may be mild and there may be no obvious site of infection.
- Symptoms of opioid overdose may overlap with botulism, such as slurred speech, inability to talk, weakness, and trouble breathing. Consider the diagnosis of botulism in persons treated with naloxone for an overdose who do not fully recover.
- In patients with risk factors for wound botulism (injected drug use or evidence of abscess at an injection site) assess for signs and symptoms of botulism, including acute bilateral cranial nerve palsies (ptosis, diplopia, dysarthria), descending symmetrical weakness, or shortness of breath.
- If you suspect wound botulism, obtain infectious disease, neurology, and surgical consultation (for wound debridement) as indicated, and contact the Oregon Health Authority Epidemiologist on-call at [971-673-1111](tel:971-673-1111).

More information for clinicians about botulism is available at:

<https://www.oregon.gov/oha/PH/DISEASESCONDITIONS/DISEASESAZ/Pages/botulism.aspx> and from CDC's website: <https://www.cdc.gov/botulism/health-professional.html>



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

Appendix C Broadcast Fax Worksheet

Subject Wound Botulism Date _____

- Group 001 ICP
- Group 002 Hospitals
- Group 003 Family Practice
- Group 004 Internal Medicine
- Group 005 CD Counties/DHS
- Group 006 Pharmacies
- Group 007 Nursing Homes ALF RCF
- Group 008 Dermatology
- Group 009 School Nurse
- Group 010 School Administrator
- Group 011 Private School
- Group 012 Ambulance
- Group 013 Labs
- Group 014 Bio Emergency Contacts
- Group 015 OBGYN
- Group 016 Pediatrics
- Group 017 Correction Facilities
- Group 018 Medical Associations
- Group 019 Blood Collection Centers
- Group 020 Police
- Group 021 Transportation
- Group 022 Utility Workers
- Group 023 Telecommunications IT
- Group 024 Funeral Directors Embalmers
- Group 025 Alternative Dispensing Site Groups
- Group 026 Board of Commissioners City Mayors City Managers
- Group 027 EMS
- Group 028 Emergency Management
- Group 029 Food (Transportation)
- Group 030 Fuel (Transportation)
- Group 031 Daycares
- Group 032 Veterinarians
- Group 033 Specialists
- Group 034 Willamette Health Partners
- Group 066 Administration/Polk County