



**North West London Health
Protection Unit**

61 Colindale Avenue
London
NW9 5EQ

Tel +44 (0) 20 8327 7181
Fax +44 (0) 20 8327 7206
www.hpa.org.uk

26 May 2010

BOTULISM: INFORMATION FOR INJECTING DRUG USERS AND AGENCIES

The Health Protection Agency has this week been notified of a case of botulism in a heroin user from North West London. The patient injected heroin by skin popping and has been admitted to hospital with severe infection. The patient recently purchased heroin in both the Watford and Harrow areas and the case raises the possibility that a batch of heroin is contaminated.

We are providing this information in case **you** or your clients are at risk. Please share the following:

Prevention of botulism in IDUs:

The following advice may reduce the risk of wound botulism in IDUs.

- Smoke heroin instead of injecting.
- 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 bacteria than your muscle.
- Don't share needles, syringes, cookers/spoons or other 'works' with other drug users
- 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 and with clean works for each injection. This is important because certain drugs (e.g. cocaine) 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.

Please contact the North West Health Protection Unit on the number above if you need more information on this subject.

What is botulism?

Botulism is caused by a botulinum toxin, which is a poison produced by the bacterium *Clostridium botulinum*. The bacterium is common in the soil in the form of spores.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms often begin with blurred vision and difficulty in swallowing and speaking, but sometimes diarrhoea and vomiting can occur. The disease can lead to difficulty breathing or paralysis. Most cases make a recovery, but the recovery period can be many months. The disease can be fatal in 5-10% of cases.

How do you catch botulism?

It can be caught through eating contaminated food or breathing in spores.

However it can also develop in wounds or abscesses associated with injecting drugs. Those who inject intramuscularly or subcutaneously ("skin popping") are at higher risk.

How long can you have the infection before developing symptoms?

Usually 12-36 hours between exposure to the toxin and the development of symptoms.

How can botulism be prevented or treated?

Antitoxin is available which can be given to a patient as an "antidote" to tackle the toxin. In addition, treatment will focus on tackling the symptoms, such as supporting ventilation in the event of respiratory failure.

Please enter local contact information in box below:

Nearest A&E:

Local prescribing unit:

Drug and Alcohol Team: