



NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF
HEALTH AND MENTAL HYGIENE
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Commissioner

2012 ALERT # 3 Foodborne Botulism

Please Share this Alert with All Emergency Medicine, Family Medicine, Infectious Disease, Internal Medicine, Laboratory Medicine, Neurology and Pediatric Staff in Your Hospital

- **One confirmed and one suspected foodborne botulism case have been identified in the Chinese community in Queens.**
- **Consumers should discard fresh bulk tofu purchased from any NYC store if that tofu was kept at room temperature at the time of purchase or kept at room temperature after purchase.**
- **Consumers should discard any “fermented stinky tofu” (*chou doufu*) made from fresh bulk tofu purchased from any NYC store.**
- **DOHMH requests immediate reporting of suspected botulism cases to evaluate whether botulinum antitoxin is indicated and to arrange confirmatory testing.**

March 30, 2012

The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) is investigating one confirmed and one suspect case of foodborne botulism in Chinese speaking residents of Queens. Both patients have required mechanical ventilation. The first patient was admitted in early March; the patient has recovered and was discharged home. The second patient was reported yesterday and remains hospitalized.

Both patients had recently purchased unrefrigerated fresh bulk tofu from the same store in Flushing. The tofu was purchased from an open, water-filled bin that was not refrigerated. The tofu was not made at this supermarket and we are working with other agencies to determine the source and distribution for this product.

We are advising physicians, specifically those serving the Chinese community, to have a high index of suspicion for botulism in any patient with otherwise unexplained cranial nerve palsies and/or symmetrical descending paresis or flaccid paralysis, especially if afebrile and/or if sensory nerves and mental status remain unaffected. Respiratory failure requiring long-term mechanical ventilation can occur if not promptly treated with botulinum antitoxin.

Foodborne botulism occurs as a result of preformed toxin generated by *Clostridium botulinum* spores. Although the toxin can be inactivated by heat, the spores are heat resistant. Food containing *Clostridium botulinum* spores generates toxin under anaerobic conditions. The incubation period is from 6 hours to 8 days. Early symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. Fever is uncommon. Cranial nerve palsies are among the earliest neurologic signs with patients often reporting blurry vision progressing to symmetric, descending paralysis and respiratory muscle paralysis. Voluntary motor and autonomic functions are affected while the sensory system and mental status are preserved.

Consumers should discard fresh bulk tofu purchased from any NYC store if that tofu was kept at room temperature at the time of purchase. Consumers should also discard tofu that has not been stored in a refrigerator at home and any “fermented stinky tofu” (*chou doufu*) made from fresh bulk tofu purchased from any NYC store.

Patients with suspect botulism should be treated with immediate administration of botulinum anti-toxin, which is only available from CDC after consultation with DOHMH. Because antitoxin will only stop progression of botulism and not reverse the symptoms, cases should be reported to the Health Department **immediately** so we can arrange consultation with CDC and release of antitoxin.

Diagnosis can take several days. **Treatment should not wait for testing.** Specimens needed for testing include at least 10 cc of serum collected before administration of antitoxin, and stool collected in a sterile cup (can use sterile water enema if necessary).

If botulism is suspected, please contact NYC DOHMH’s Bureau of Communicable Disease to discuss whether immediate administration of botulinum antitoxin or immune globulin (i.e., for infants) is indicated. Laboratory testing for botulism also can be arranged at that time.

Business hours: 347-396-2674

Non-business hours: Call the Poison Control Center at 212-764-7667 (212-POISONS)

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