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Bulletin No. 17
November 4, 1977

Botulism - Seward Peninsula

Two outbreaks of botulism occurred during the last week in October on the Seward Peninsula, both caused by foods prepared by fermentation.

GOLOVIN - Three people ages 34, 23, and 13 developed botulism after eating fermented seal on October 25. All three were flown to Anchorage, treated with trivalent botulism antitoxin, and have recovered. Type E toxin was recovered from serum of one of the patients from the implicated food.

NOME - While the patients from Golovin were being taken care of, a 35-year-old woman was admitted on October 30 to the Norton Sound Regional Hospital with symptoms of botulism. Her illness was caused by fermented muktuk. The patient was flown to Anchorage where she required tracheostomy and is on a respirator.

Botulism is caused by a poison produced by a specific bacteria. This poison is very strong and a tiny amount can lead to death. The poison is produced in food which is inadequately prepared or stored. Food which comes in contact with soil, or spilled fish gut contents, or food stored in air-tight plastic bags or jars may allow the poison to form. In Alaska, all botulism outbreaks have been caused by Native foods. These have included: beluga muktuk, beluga flipper, seal meat, dried white fish, smoked salmon, and salmon "stink eggs".

If a person eats food containing poison, symptoms will begin usually within 24 hours. The major symptoms are:

1. Nausea and vomiting
2. Double vision (seeing double)
3. Difficulty in swallowing
4. Very dry throat
5. Dilated (large) pupils that do not become small when light is shown in the eye.

If anyone has three or more of the above symptoms, you must contact the doctor immediately and the patient must be evacuated to the nearest hospital. Any delay could lead to death. In addition you must check other family members to see if they are developing symptoms and you must try to determine what food caused the illness. Save the food you think caused the illness. Do not throw it out but make sure no one else eats it.

Prompt medical therapy is essential and may prevent death! Report any patient suspected of having botulism to John Middaugh, M.D., 272-7534 (work) or 333-1935 (home) or to the Center for Disease Control, Alaskan Activities, 279-9511.