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BOTULISM - OUTBREAKS SPARK WARNINGS

State health officials are issuing warnings about the consumption of uncooked or fermented native traditional foods because of a recent dramatic increase in the number of botulism outbreaks in Alaska. Since June 25, 1985, 6 outbreaks of botulism affecting 20 individuals have been documented. Since the first of the year, 7 outbreaks of botulism have occurred and 22 individuals have been affected. Of the 22 individuals stricken with symptoms of botulism, 11 had such severe illnesses that air evacuation to hospitals was required. Fortunately, no deaths have occurred.

Outbreaks of botulism in 1985 have occurred in Hooper Bay, Nome, Ekuk, Klawock, Kotzebue, Kanakanak, and Chefornak. The outbreaks in Ekuk and Kanakanak have involved 15 individuals. All outbreaks were associated with the consumption of traditionally prepared uncooked and fermented native foods such as seal flipper, fish heads, salmon eggs, and beaver tail. To date, no cases of botulism in Alaska have involved home canned or commercially prepared foods.

Botulism is caused by a bacteria, Clostridium botulinum, which is found in the soil throughout Alaska. The bacteria that produces botulinum toxin grows in conditions of low oxygen. Sealed plastic bags, closed jars, and covered containers, especially when kept in a warm environment, allow Clostridium botulinum to produce toxin. Heating destroys the toxin. The disease is characterized by symmetric paralysis often with progressive respiratory weakness, normal temperature, postural hypotension, double vision, eye-muscle weakness, and paralysis of other cranial nerves. While the incubation period is usually 12-48 hours, symptoms have appeared as early as 6 hours and as late as 18 days after eating affected food. Botulism is not communicable from one person to another.

There are several approaches to the problem of preventing deaths from botulism:

- 1) avoidance of uncooked, fermented, traditional native foods,
- 2) informing individuals of the dangers of preserving contaminated food under anaerobic conditions and of eating food uncooked, and
- 3) recognition of cases early enough to allow appropriate medical care.

Botulism is a true public health emergency. It is important for community health aides, public health nurses, physicians and other health care providers to learn to recognize the symptoms of botulism and to keep the diagnosis in mind. Prompt reporting of all cases in whom the diagnosis is suspected is critical to initiate epidemiologic investigation. It is essential that individuals suspected of having symptoms of botulism seek and receive medical care immediately. Those who suspect botulism must observe the patient closely and be prepared to provide respiratory and circulatory

support. With early recognition and excellent treatment, most individuals will recover completely. Consultation is available through the Epidemiology Office, Division of Public Health, 561-4406, or the Arctic Investigation Laboratory, Centers For Disease Control, 271-4011.

Botulism - - Alaska

