

## Food Safety for Infants: Honey Can Have an Unsuspected Sting



The newspaper related the story of a young mother, asked by her doctor, "What does your little girl eat for breakfast?"

"Only hot oatmeal with milk," the young mother answered.

"Does she put any sugar on it?" the doctor queried. Now the lady became indignant.

"We eat only whole, natural foods. No meat, no processed food, no sugar. Sugar is poison. We put only natural honey on the oatmeal."

And with those words the woman confirmed the **doctor's suspicion**. The little girl's baby brother, who had been brought to the hospital suffering from some mysterious ailment, had **botulism poisoning**.

The 3-month-old baby had suddenly stopped nursing, and within four days his body became progressively floppy. By the time he was brought to the emergency room, he was practically lifeless. At first, doctors suspected spinal muscular atrophy, a rare neurological disease that is essentially a death warrant. But it doesn't usually come on so suddenly. Such a rapid onset of symptoms smacked of poisoning of some sort. Botulism would explain the muscular flaccidity, but how could it be, if the mother was unaffected? She swore that the baby had no food other than breast milk. The doctor, however, was not so sure. That's what prompted the questions about the boy's sister. Yes, the little girl did like to help with the baby, the mother divulged; sometimes she even pretended to feed him with an empty spoon. Now the lights flashed in the physician's mind. When the parents weren't watching, the little girl probably did more than pretend and treated the baby to a bit of her honey-laced oatmeal. Unfortunately, the honey was likely laced with spores of ***Clostridium botulinum***; and those spores could produce toxin in the infant's immature intestinal tract. Laboratory results confirmed the presence of the botulism toxin in the baby's serum and feces and spores in the jar of honey. The little boy eventually recovered, although he spent five weeks on a respirator.

That's what botulinum toxin can do. The spores of ***Clostridium botulinum*** are everywhere. They're in the soil, in the air and in the pollen and nectar the bees gather. Adults don't have to worry about botulinum spores germinating in the digestive tract (it's too acidic), but infants under 1 year of age don't have fully developed digestive systems and the spores can survive and produce the often-fatal toxin. And both adults and children do have to be concerned about eating food in which spores have germinated and produced their toxin. Foods implicated in foodborne illness outbreaks in older children and adults include **improperly canned food, meats not properly cured (i.e. sausages without proper nitrite), garlic-in-oil mixtures, improperly refrigerated baked potatoes, mushrooms, cooked onions, and even improperly handled frozen foods**.

**UWEX Recommends: Adults should avoid feeding honey or syrup (including corn syrup) to children – for the first year. Honey as an ingredient in cookies or crackers does not seem to present a problem. Honey and syrups can contain spores of *Clostridium botulinum*. The immune systems of adults and older children can prevent the spores from growing once ingested. However, in an infant, these spores can grow and cause infant botulism.**

For more information:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention <http://emergency.cdc.gov/agent/botulism/>
- Mayo Clinic <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/infant-botulism/HQ00854>
- National Honey Board <http://www.honey.com/downloads/infantbotulism.pdf>