



# County of Santa Cruz

## HEALTH SERVICES AGENCY

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### Public Health Division

## PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY

**To:** All Healthcare Providers  
**From:** Gail Newel, MD, MPH, County Health Officer  
**Subject:** Wound Botulism  
**Date:** March 26, 2021

**Situational Update:** Recently, a wound botulism patient presented to a local emergency department with a history of injection drug use and symptoms suggestive of botulism (difficulty swallowing, blurred vision, and general weakness). Wound botulism was not considered in the differential diagnosis until 6 days after the initial assessment and the patient required prolonged intensive care treatment. The source of the botulism remains unknown and additional cases may occur. This is the second wound botulism case locally in recent months. Public Health asks that local health care providers be aware of the overall increase in reported wound botulism cases associated with injection drug use, including these local cases and several other clusters in California.

### RECCOMENDTIONS

- **Be alert for cases of wound botulism**, especially in persons who inject drugs. Symptoms include altered vision, drooping eyelids, difficulty swallowing, speaking, or breathing, and muscle weakness which can progress to descending paralysis. Symptoms can resemble intoxication or drug overdose. Patients can present with mild symptoms which can progress quickly to respiratory failure. Wound botulism patients do not always present with a visible wound or abscess.
- **Prompt clinical diagnoses is imperative** as timely administration of botulism antitoxin (BAT) can halt the progression of disease, lead to better outcomes, and save lives.
- **Clinicians must immediately report any suspect botulism patients** to the Communicable Disease Unit at **(831) 454-4114**. After hours call **(831) 471-1170** and ask to speak with the Public Health official on call, who will notify the State as necessary.

- State health officials are on call 24/7 to provide technical consultation for botulism testing and BAT release. The decision to administer BAT is based on clinical presentation. **BAT administration should not be withheld pending laboratory confirmation.**
- Clinicians should alert their patients that injecting drugs may increase their risk of botulism as well as hepatitis and HIV. **Persons who inject black tar heroin are especially at risk for wound botulism** and cooking or cleaning drug paraphernalia does not decrease a person’s risk.

**Additional resources:**

- California Department of Public Health (CDPH) “[Black Tar Heroin May Cause Botulism](#)” flyer
- CDC MMWR: [Botulism Outbreak Among Persons Who Use Black Tar Heroin — San Diego County, California, 2017–2018](#)
- [CDPH Botulism Fact Sheet](#)
- [CDC Botulism](#)

For more provider guidance, please visit our Santa Cruz County [COVID 19 Provider Guidance Website](#)



**Health Alert:** conveys the highest level of importance; warrants immediate action or attention.

**Health Advisory:** provides important information for a specific incident or situation; may not require immediate action.

**Health Update:** provides updated information regarding an incident or situation; unlikely to require immediate action.