



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
**September 24, 2021**

### ***Possible Wound Botulism from Injected Black Tar Heroin Under Investigation***

BUTTE COUNTY, Calif. – Butte County Public Health (BCPH) is investigating a case of wound botulism in a Butte County resident who injected drugs, including black tar heroin. Laboratory test results to confirm the diagnosis are pending. The source of the heroin is unknown at this time. Black tar heroin has been linked to other wound botulism cases and outbreaks in injection drug users, so there is concern that locally available black tar heroin may be contaminated.

California has the highest rate of wound botulism in the United States. This is the third case reported in Butte County this year.

Since 2016, there have been 22 to 59 cases of wound botulism annually in California. Wound botulism occurs when a wound becomes infected with *Clostridium botulinum* (the cause of foodborne botulism) or a closely related *Clostridium* bacterium. The bacteria multiply in the wound and create a toxin that acts on the nerves. Most, but not all, people with wound botulism will have a visibly infected wound. Persons injecting black tar heroin into their muscles (“muscling”) or under their skin (“skin popping”) are at highest risk of wound botulism. Persons with wound botulism cannot transmit the illness to others.

Symptoms of wound botulism occur within days or weeks of injecting contaminated drug and may be mistaken for drug overdose. Symptoms can include weak or drooping eyelids, blurred or double vision, dry mouth, sore throat, slurred speech, trouble swallowing, difficulty breathing, and a progressive symmetric paralysis that begins at the face and head and travels down the body. If left untreated, symptoms may progress to paralysis of the respiratory muscles, arms, legs, and trunk with subsequent death. Prompt diagnosis and treatment is critical to decreasing the severity and duration of illness. Any injection drug users with symptoms of wound botulism should seek medical attention immediately at the nearest emergency room.

Healthcare providers should immediately report any suspected cases of botulism to BCPH. BCPH will facilitate testing and the acquisition of antitoxin treatment.

#### **TO REDUCE RISK OF WOUND BOTULISM:**

- Stop injecting drugs and seek treatment for opioid addiction: [www.buttecounty.net/behavioralhealth/substanceuse.aspx](http://www.buttecounty.net/behavioralhealth/substanceuse.aspx)
- Do not use black tar heroin. Use of black tar heroin is the drug that most often results in wound botulism.
- “Cooking” the drug and safe injection practices will prevent other blood borne infections, but will NOT prevent wound botulism.

**BUTTE COUNTY PUBLIC HEALTH DEPARTMENT ACTIONS:**

- Issued a health advisory to area providers to promote rapid diagnosis and reporting.
- Conducted outreach and provided information to homeless shelters, drug treatment facilities, and other locations that serve persons who may be at risk of wound botulism.
- Alerted the public through a media release.

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