Design for Biosecurity

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Lecture 28

Botulism Toxin

Welcome back. This is our third class of the sixth week, and today we will be focusing on botulism toxin. This toxin is notable for its diverse pathological effects, yet it is also utilized in Botox therapy, a treatment many of you might be familiar with for its cosmetic benefits. We will explore how this toxin works and its applications in today's class.

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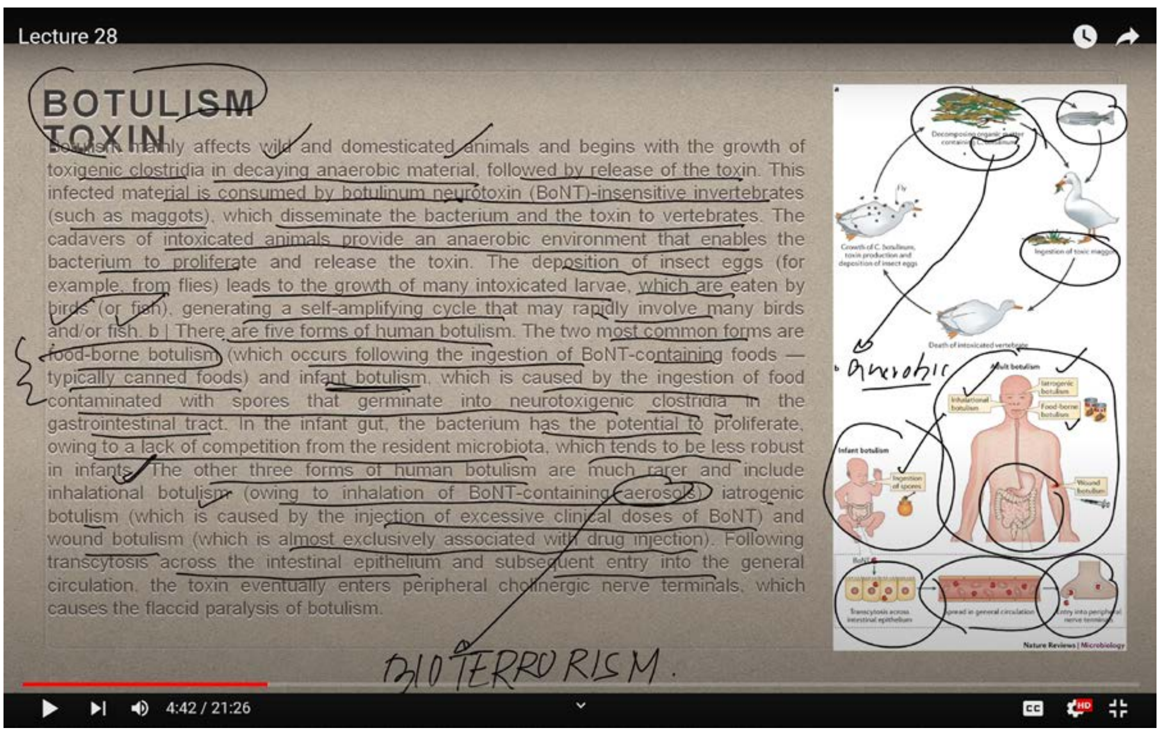

Let's start by focusing on what botulism toxin actually is. Botulism primarily affects both wild and domesticated animals. It begins with the growth of toxigenic Clostridium botulinum, a bacterium found in decaying anaerobic material, which then releases the toxin. The process starts with the decomposition of organic matter harboring Clostridium botulinum. This material can be consumed by insensitive invertebrates, such as maggots, which then carry the bacterium and toxin to vertebrates.

The cadavers of intoxicated animals create an anaerobic environment that supports the proliferation of the bacterium. This bacterium thrives in low-oxygen conditions and continues to release toxins. For instance, the deposition of insect eggs, such as those of flies, leads to the growth of many intoxicated larvae, which are subsequently consumed by birds or fish, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of contamination. That is why you often see images of affected fish, which can quickly spread the toxin to birds and other animals.

In humans, there are five recognized forms of botulism. The two most common forms are:

1. Foodborne Botulism: This occurs when an individual ingests food contaminated with botulinum neurotoxin, typically from improperly canned foods.

2. Infant Botulism: This results from the ingestion of food contaminated with spores of Clostridium botulinum, which then germinate into neurotoxic bacteria in the gastrointestinal tract.

We will discuss these forms in more detail, along with other types such as iatrogenic botulism (which results from medical treatments), inhalation botulism, and botulism from ingestion of spores. For instance, one common precaution in the United States is advising against giving honey to infants. Honey may contain botulinum toxin spores, which can pose a risk to young children.

Returning to the slide, in infants, the bacterium has the potential to proliferate due to the limited competition from resident microbiota, which is not yet fully developed in young children. The other three forms of human botulism are much rarer and include:

1. Inhalational Botulism: This occurs due to the inhalation of aerosols containing botulinum toxin. Such aerosols could potentially be used as bioterrorism agents.

2. Iatrogenic Botulism: This results from the injection of excessive clinical doses of botulinum toxin.

3. Wound Botulism: This form is almost exclusively associated with drug injection practices.

Botulism follows a specific path: after transcytosis across the intestinal epithelium, the toxin spreads through the general circulation and enters the peripheral nervous system, causing flaccid paralysis.

To summarize, Clostridium botulinum is a bacterium that produces a highly dangerous toxin known as botulinum toxin under low oxygen conditions. As an anaerobic bacterium, it thrives in environments with little to no oxygen. Botulinum toxins are among the most lethal substances known; they block nerve function and can lead to severe respiratory and muscular paralysis.

Human botulism can manifest in several forms, including:

Foodborne Botulism: Caused by the ingestion of improperly processed foods that contain the toxin. This rare but potentially fatal disease requires rapid diagnosis and treatment with antitoxin, essentially an antibody against the toxin. Homemade canned, preserved, or fermented foods are common sources, and careful preparation is crucial.

Infant Botulism: Occurs when infants ingest food contaminated with spores that germinate into neurotoxic Clostridium botulinum in the gastrointestinal tract.

Wound Botulism: Linked to drug injection practices.

Inhalational Botulism: Resulting from inhaling botulinum toxin-containing aerosols.

It's important to note that botulism is not transmitted from person to person. The spores of Clostridium botulinum are heat-resistant and exist widely in the environment. In the absence of oxygen, these spores germinate, grow, and produce the toxin.

There are seven distinct forms of botulinum toxin, labeled from types A to G. Among these, types A, B, E, and F are known to cause botulism in humans. Types C, D, and E primarily affect other mammals, including birds and fish. The botulinum toxin is ingested through improperly processed foods where bacteria or their spores have survived. These bacteria grow and produce toxins under anaerobic conditions, meaning they thrive in environments devoid of oxygen.

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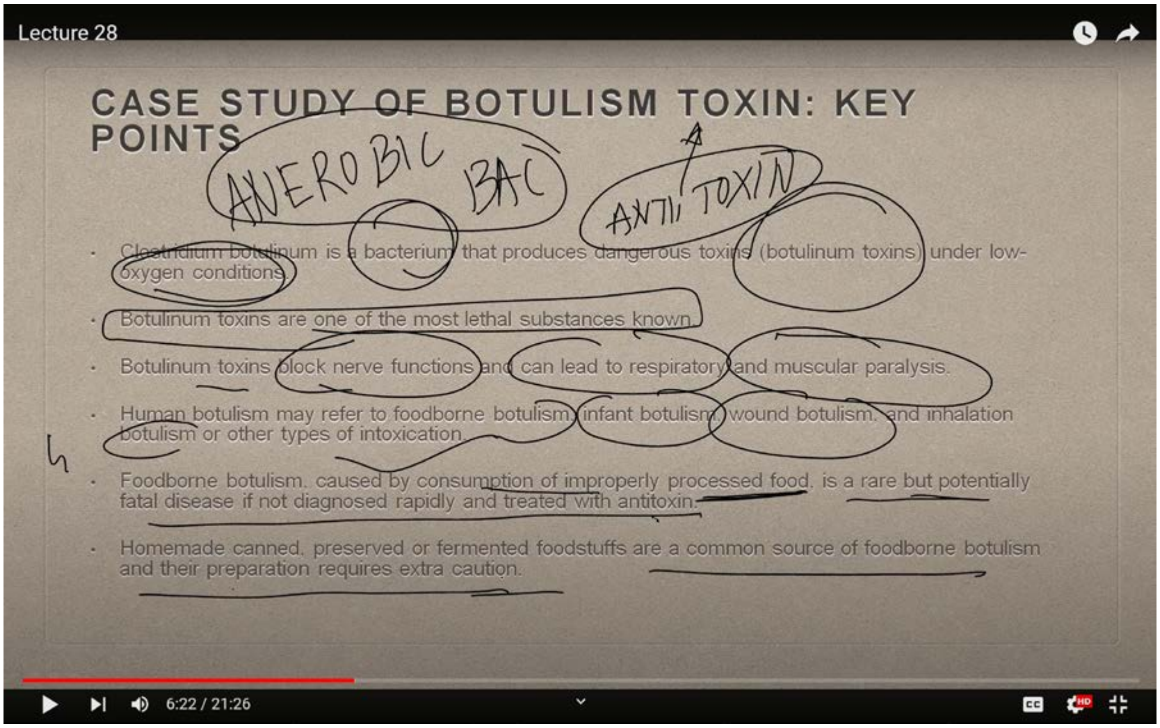

Human botulism, while predominantly a foodborne intoxication, can also result from intestinal infections with Clostridium botulinum in infants, wound infections, or inhalation of the toxin. The botulinum toxin is highly neurotoxic and affects the nervous system. Foodborne botulism is marked by descending flaccid paralysis, which can lead to respiratory failure. Early symptoms include significant fatigue, weakness, and vertigo, often followed by blurred vision, dry mouth, and difficulty swallowing and speaking.

Additional symptoms may include vomiting, diarrhea, constipation, and abdominal swelling. As the disease progresses, weakness can extend to the neck and arms, eventually impacting the respiratory muscles and the muscles of the lower body. Notably, botulism does not present with fever or loss of consciousness. The absence of fever is a key distinguishing feature of botulism. The symptoms are caused by the toxin produced by the bacteria, not the bacteria itself. As previously mentioned, the bacteria germinate, grow, and produce toxins in low-oxygen environments.

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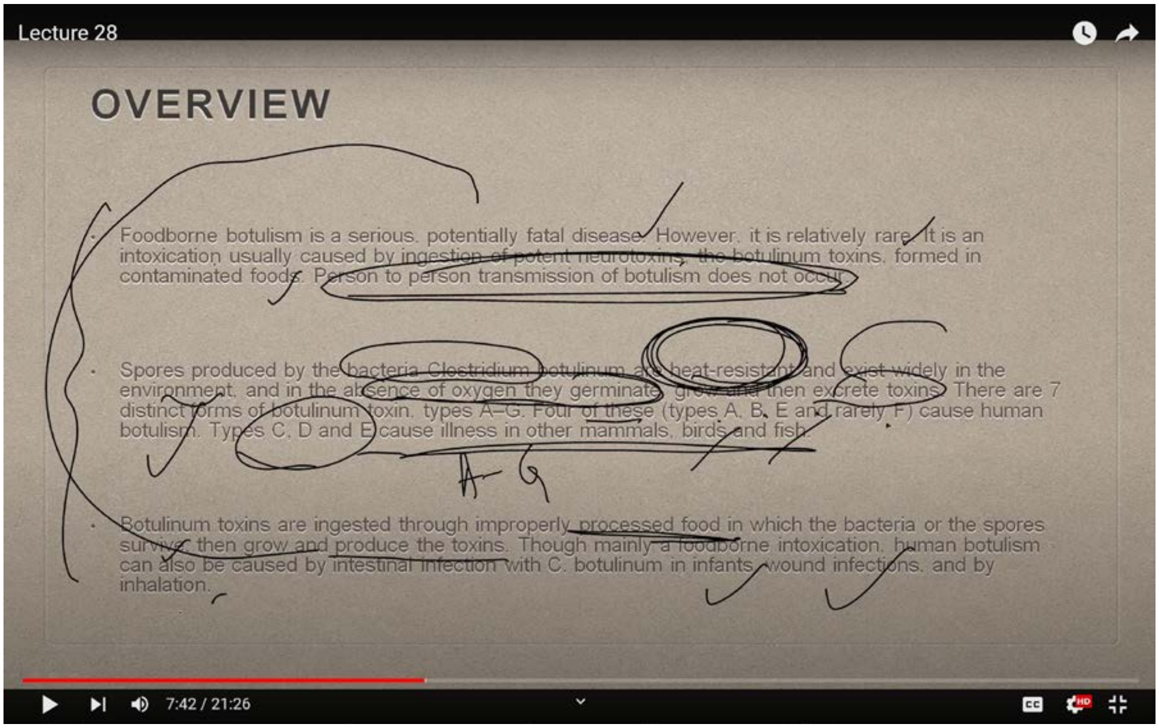

Symptoms typically appear within 12 to 36 hours after exposure, with a possible range of 4 hours to 8 days. Although the incidence of botulism is relatively low, the mortality rate is high. Prompt diagnosis and immediate treatment are crucial; early administration of antitoxin and intensive respiratory care are essential. Without timely intervention, the disease can be fatal in 5 to 10 percent of cases.

Regarding foodborne botulism, it’s important to remember that Clostridium botulinum is an anaerobic bacterium, meaning it only grows in the absence of oxygen. Botulism occurs when this bacterium grows and produces toxins in food before it is consumed. The spores of Clostridium botulinum are widespread in the environment, including in soil, rivers, and seawater. The bacteria thrive and produce toxins in foods that have low oxygen content, combined with specific storage temperatures and preservative conditions.

It's important to be cautious because some preservatives can actually promote the growth of botulinum toxins. This issue often arises with lightly preserved foods and inadequately processed home-canned or home-bottled items.

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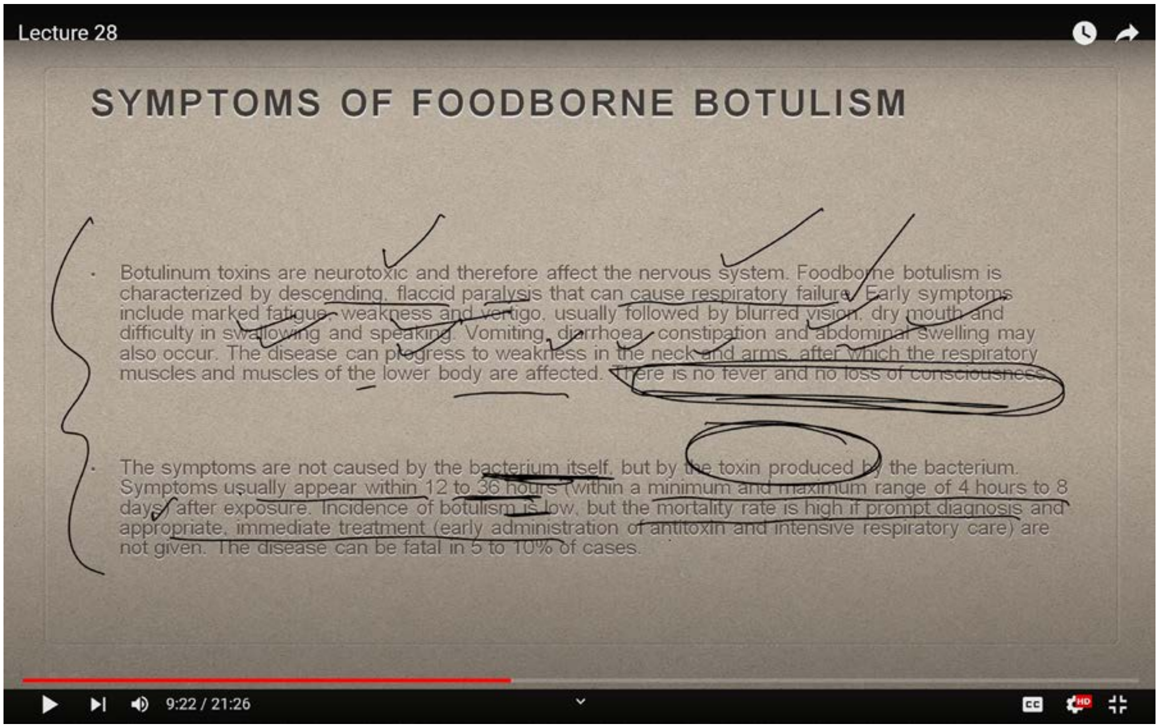

Clostridium botulinum will not thrive in acidic conditions, so you won't find this bacterium in the acidic parts of your gastrointestinal tract, where the pH is less than 4.5. Therefore, botulinum toxin is not produced in acidic foods. However, while a low pH prevents bacterial growth, it does not degrade any preformed toxins. The bacteria themselves will not grow in low pH environments, but the toxin remains unaffected. To prevent bacterial growth and toxin formation, a combination of low storage temperatures, salt content, and pH levels is employed.

Botulinum toxin has been detected in a range of foods, including low-acid preserved vegetables such as green beans, spinach, mushrooms, and beets; various types of fish, including canned tuna and fermented, salted, or smoked fish; and meat products like ham and sausages. The specific foods involved can vary by region, reflecting local dietary habits. Sometimes, commercially prepared foods are implicated as well.

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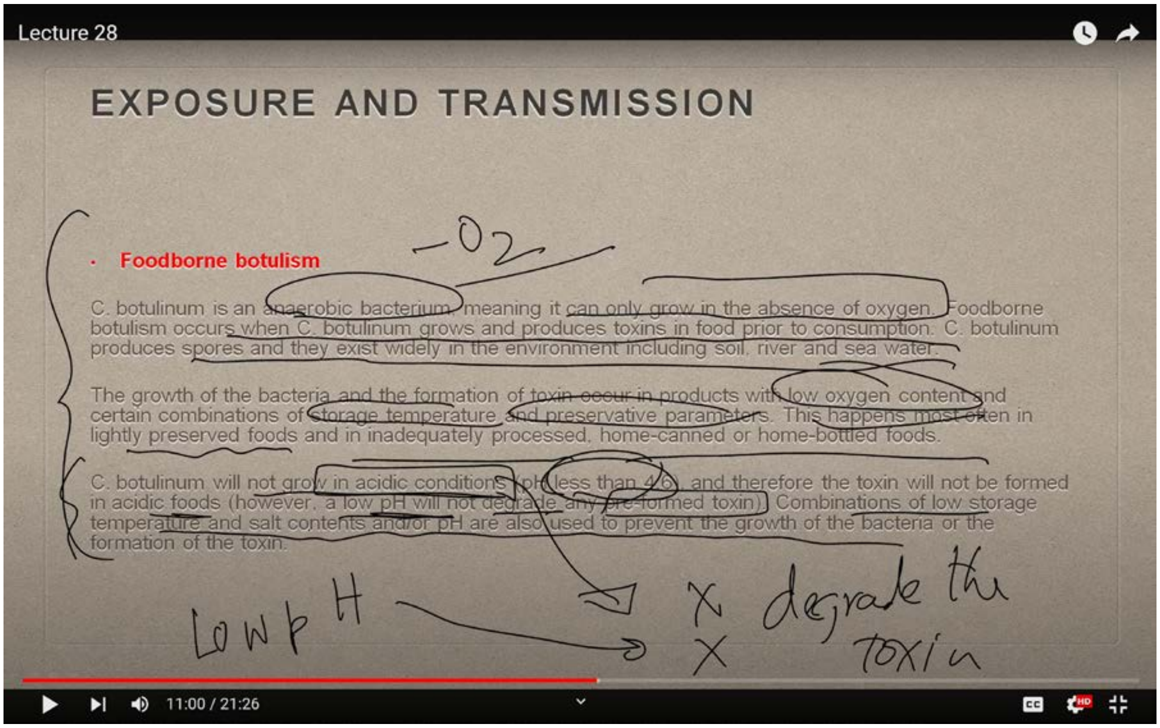

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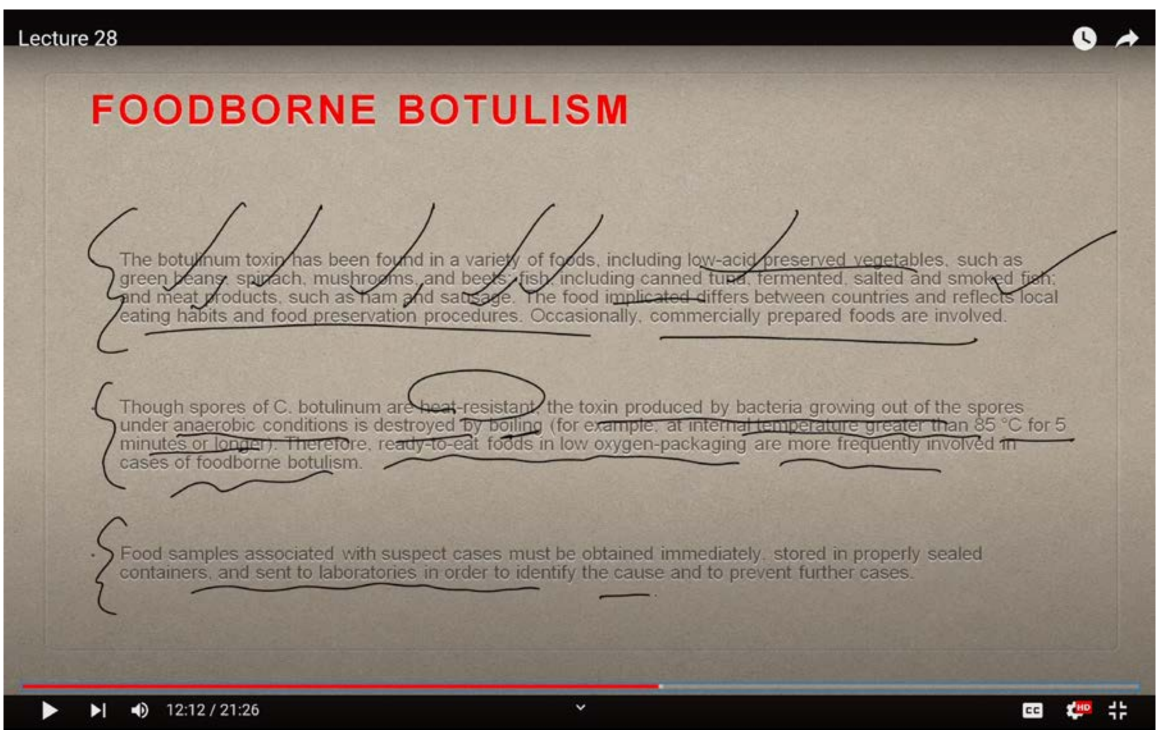

This wide range of potential sources underscores the importance of understanding where infections can occur and highlights the extensive potential zone of contamination. Despite the heat resistance of Clostridium botulinum spores, the toxin produced by bacteria growing from these spores under anaerobic conditions can be destroyed by boiling. Boiling at an internal temperature above 85 degrees Celsius (185 degrees Fahrenheit) for five minutes or more is effective in neutralizing the toxin. Therefore, foods packaged in low-oxygen environments are more frequently associated with foodborne botulism cases.

For suspected cases of botulism, it is crucial to obtain food samples immediately, store them in properly sealed containers, and send them to laboratories for analysis to identify the cause and prevent further cases.

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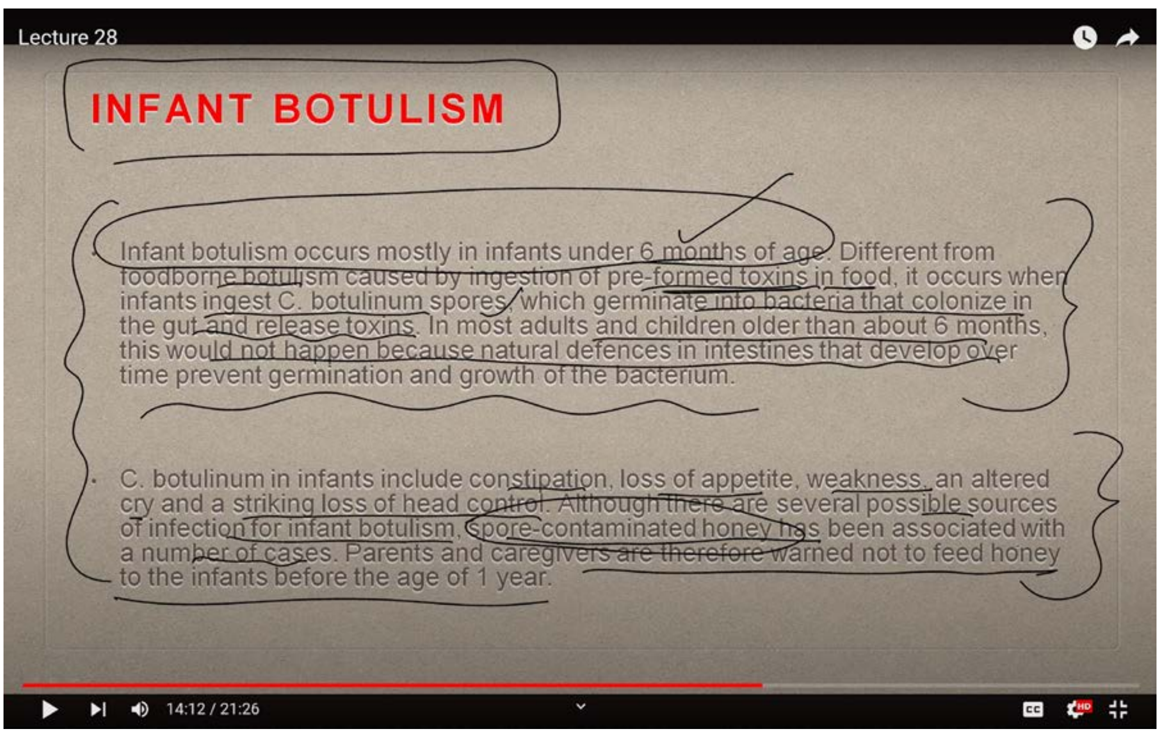

Regarding infant botulism, this condition predominantly affects infants under six months of age. At this age, the microbial defenses in the gut are not yet fully developed, making it easier for Clostridium botulinum to grow. Infants are less exposed to diverse foods and are typically reliant on breast milk or infant formula. Unlike foodborne botulism, which is caused by ingesting preformed toxins, infant botulism occurs when infants ingest Clostridium botulinum spores. These spores then germinate into bacteria that colonize the gut and produce toxins. In most older children and adults, the natural defenses in the intestine prevent the germination of these bacteria. However, in infants under six months, these defenses are not yet established. Symptoms of infant botulism include constipation, loss of appetite, weakness, altered crying patterns, and a notable loss of head control. One significant source of infection in infants is spore-contaminated honey, which has been linked to several cases of infant botulism.

Parents and caregivers are strongly advised not to give honey to infants before they reach one year of age. This caution arises from multiple cases where honey has been found to contain Clostridium botulinum spores. In many Western countries, this recommendation is widely enforced to prevent botulism.

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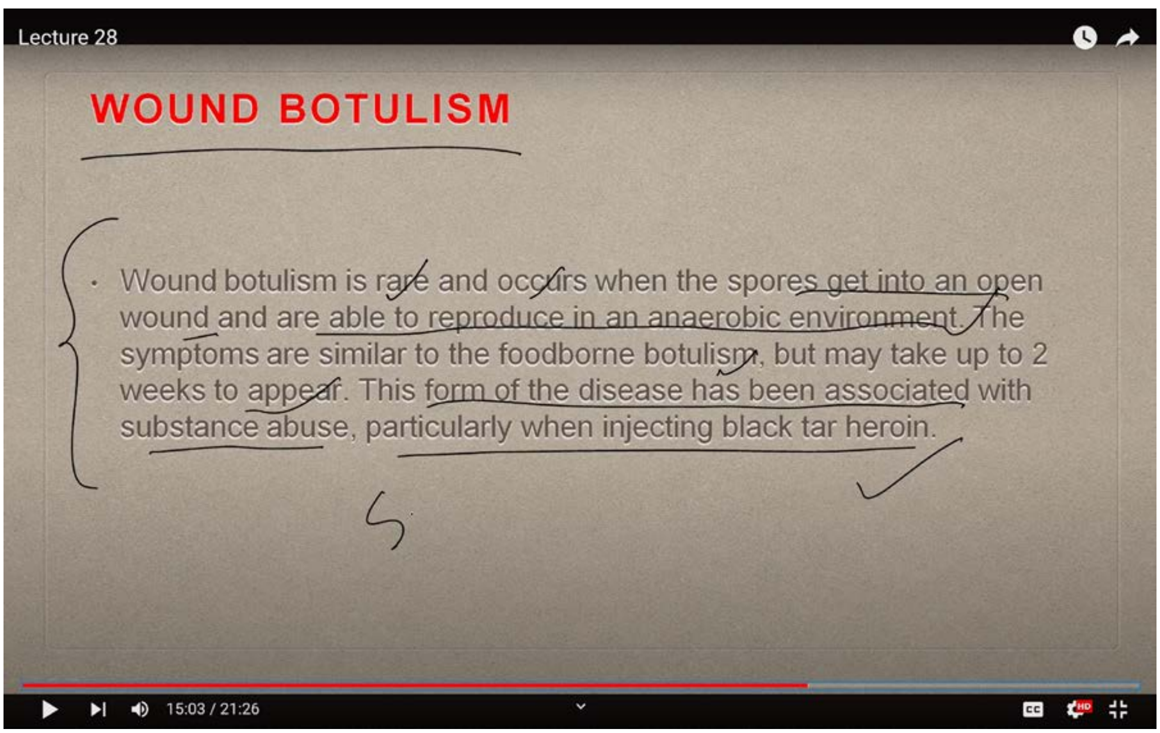

Wound botulism, the third form of botulism we discussed, is a rare condition that occurs when Clostridium botulinum spores enter an open wound and proliferate in an anaerobic environment. The symptoms of wound botulism are similar to those of foodborne botulism but may take up to two weeks to manifest. This form of botulism is often associated with substance abuse, particularly in individuals injecting black tar heroin. Thus, wound botulism is frequently observed in cases of drug addiction.

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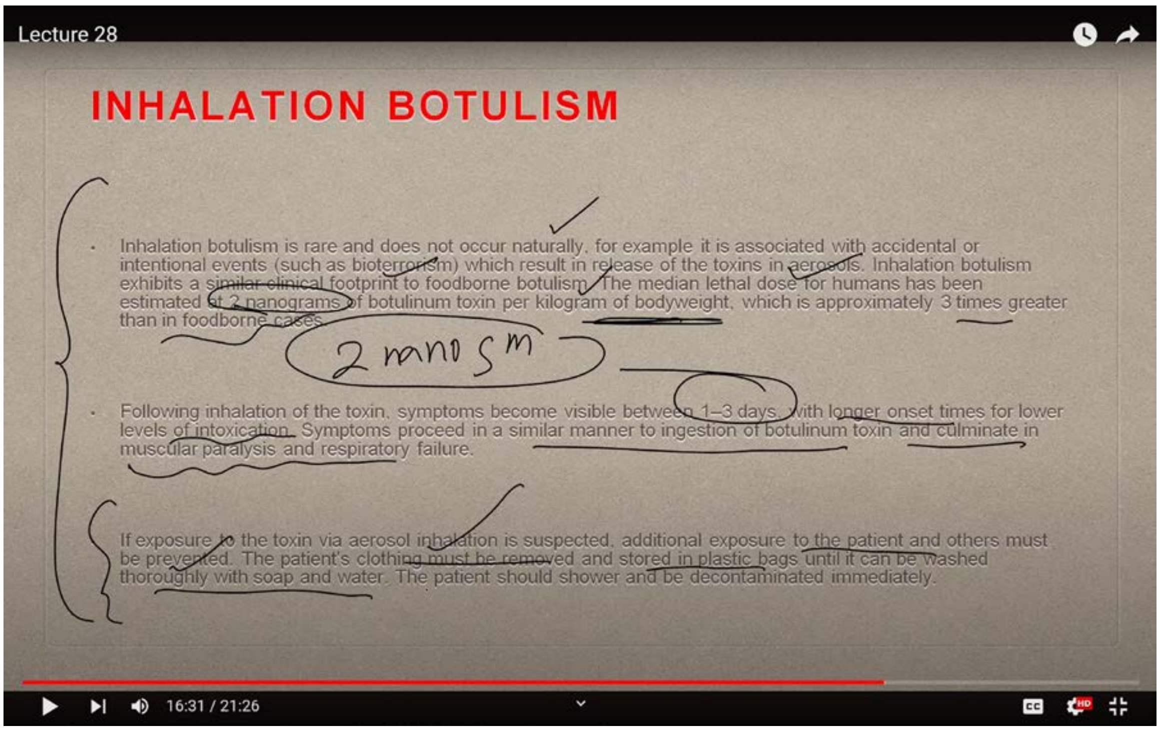

One of the rarest forms of botulism is inhalation botulism. This type does not occur naturally and is typically linked to accidental or deliberate events, such as bioterrorism, which involves the release of botulinum toxin in aerosol form. Inhalation botulism presents clinical symptoms similar to those of foodborne botulism. The median lethal dose for humans has been estimated at just two nanograms, highlighting the extreme potency of the botulinum toxin. For instance, if an individual weighs 60 kilograms, approximately 120 nanograms, three times the dose typically required for foodborne botulism, would be needed to be lethal.

Symptoms of inhalation botulism become evident within one to three days after exposure, with a longer onset time and potentially lower levels of intoxication compared to foodborne botulism. The progression of symptoms mirrors that of botulinum toxin injection, eventually leading to muscular paralysis and respiratory failure. If there is suspicion of exposure to botulinum toxin via inhalation, it is crucial to prevent further exposure. The patient's clothing should be removed and stored in plastic bags until it can be thoroughly washed with soap and water, and the patient should shower and be decontaminated immediately.

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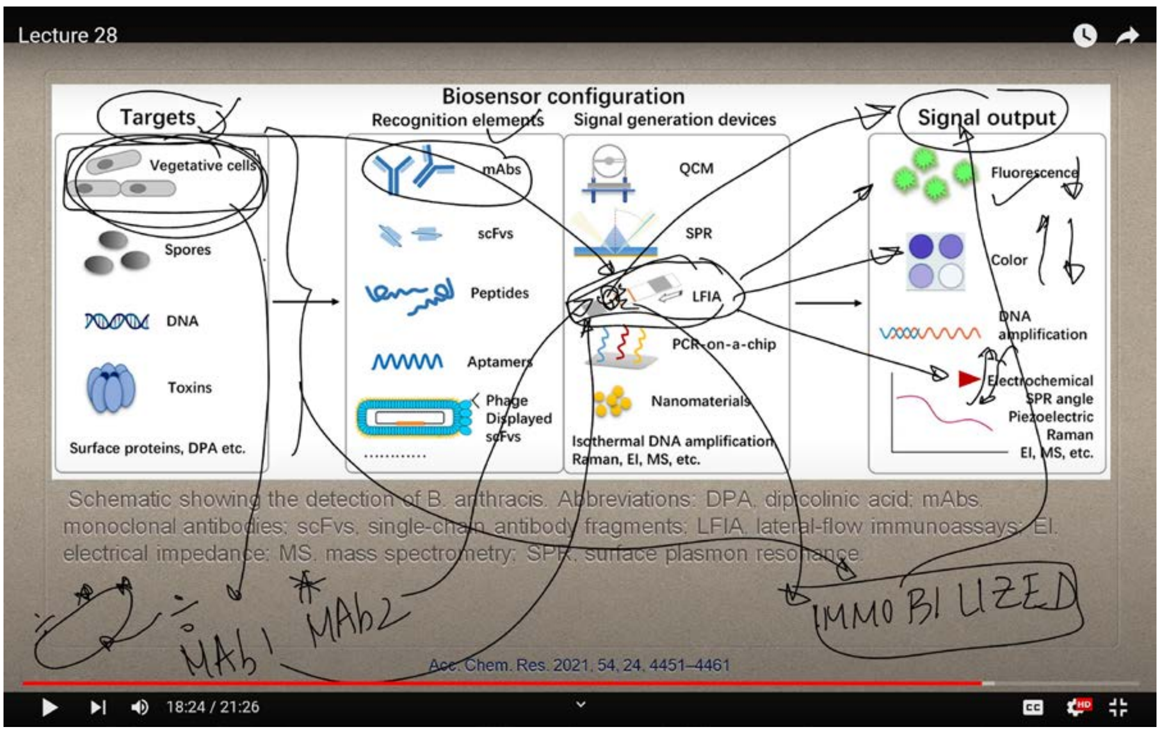

Another type of botulinum intoxication is waterborne botulism, which theoretically could occur from ingesting preformed toxins. However, standard water treatment processes such as boiling and disinfection with a 0.1% hypochlorite bleach solution are effective in destroying the toxin, so the risk is considered low. Botulism of undetermined origin generally involves cases in adults where no specific food or wound source can be identified.

These cases are comparable to infant botulism and may arise when the normal gut flora is disrupted due to surgical procedures or antibiotic treatment. Adverse effects from pure botulinum toxin have been reported in medical and cosmetic applications, which leads us to the topic of Botox therapy. It is essential to note that botulinum toxin is a fascinating substance because the bacteria itself does not cause harm until it produces the toxin.

The challenge with botulinum toxin is that its production requires an anaerobic environment and specific pH conditions. This makes detecting the bacteria and its toxin quite challenging. For instance, if you only detect the vegetative cells of Clostridium botulinum, you may not identify the problem since these cells do not exhibit effects until they produce the toxin. Toxin production only occurs in the absence of oxygen and under specific temperature and pH conditions.

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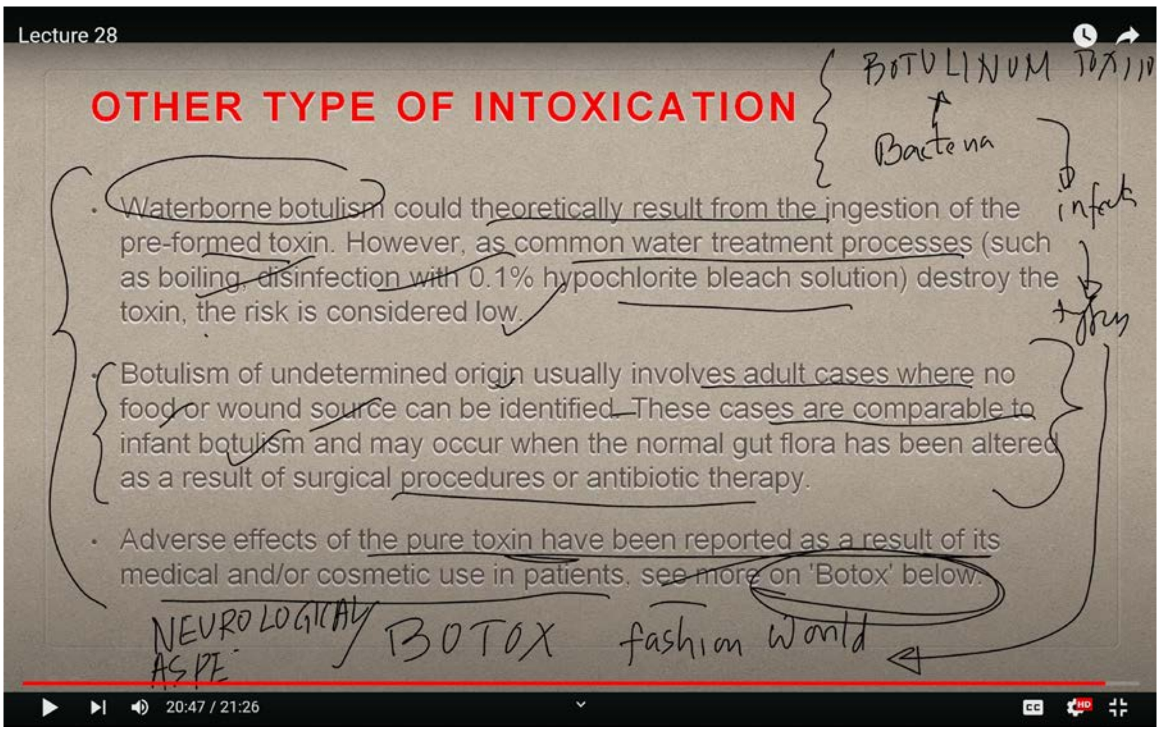

In practical terms, detecting vegetative cells alone would not be very useful. What we have developed is an antitoxin, which only works when the vegetative cells are actively producing the toxin. Thus, the challenge in developing assays or technologies for detecting botulinum toxin lies in the fact that we are targeting the toxin itself rather than the bacterial source. The Clostridium botulinum only becomes problematic once it starts producing the neurotoxin.

Moving forward, we will explore the fascinating applications of botulinum toxin, particularly its use in Botox therapy. To recap, we have discussed what botulinum toxin is, how it is generated by bacteria, and its various forms of infection. In the next class, we will delve into its applications in the fashion world, particularly focusing on Botox and its neurological effects. So I'll close in here. In the next class, we'll start with the Botox therapy. Thank you.