Incidence Study of Spores of Clostridium botulinum in Convenience Foods

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Received for publication 17 February 1969

The objective of this study was to gather data on the incidence of Clostridium botulinum spores in selected consumer-convenience food products. The incidence of spores of C. botulinum in 100 samples of each of four categories of commercially available convenience foods was determined. These categories included (i) "boil-in-the-bag" foods, (ii) vacuum-packed foods, (iii) pressurized foods, and (iv) dehydrated and freeze-dried foods. Of the 400 samples analyzed, one was found to contain the spores of C. botulinum. This occurred in vacuum-packed frankfurters and was identified as type B.

The past decade has seen an increase in the availability and use of vacuum-packed convenience foods. Data on the incidence of Clostridium botulinum in natural, uninoculated, vacuum-packed foods are limited. Greenberg et al. (6) surveyed the incidence of mesophilic clostridium spores in raw pork, beef, and chicken in processing plants in the United States and Canada. C. botulinum type C was isolated from a chicken sample at a level of 5.33 clostridia per g. Vacuum-packed products such as meat, fish, oysters, cheese, vegetables, and oriental-type foods were examined for C. botulinum by Taclindo et al. (16). C. botulinum type B toxin was found in one of 73 luncheon meats, and type C organisms and toxin were found in one of four unshucked oysters. The frequency of C. botulinum contamination of freshly caught and eviscerated chubs was found by Pace et al. (11) to be approximately 13 to 14%. Of 858 samples of freshly smoked chubs processed for 30 min to an internal temperature of 82.2 C (180 F), 10 were found to be contaminated with C. botulinum. The 10 isolates were composed of one type B and nine type E. Insalata et al. (7) analyzed 100 vacuum-packed fish that had been stored at 10 C for 28 days for botulinum toxin. After enrichment, 10 samples were found to contain type E exotoxin.

Most of the work reported has been abuse studies with inoculated packs. Perry et al. (12) tested for the presence of spores of C. botulinum and for toxicity in frozen-pack vegetables that were left standing in unopened containers for 2 days at room temperature. Although the vegetables were spoiled, none produced toxin. Working with inoculated turkey rolls, Midura, et al. (10) found that an inoculum equivalent to one spore per gram of food was the minimal number needed for toxin production under anaerobic incubation at 30 C. Liver sausage inoculated with 5,000 spores/g of Clostridium parabotulinum type A and incubated at 30 C allowed formations of toxin in 9 to 23 days. The sausage contained 2.5% salt and 0.1% sodium nitrate; increasing these concentrations and lowering the incubation temperature increased the time required for toxin formation (15). The rate of toxin formation and putrefaction in inoculated comminuted pork and beef was studied by Greenberg and Silliker (5). They found that putrid smells and toxin occurred within 24 hr at 37 C (99 F) in such vacuum-packed meats. Cann et al. (1) inoculated vacuum-packed fresh herring with 100 spores per pack. After storage for 15 days at 5 C, toxin was formed. Fish inoculated with 106 C. botulinum type E spores, smoked for 30 min to an internal temperature of 82.2 C (180 F), and sealed in plastic bags produced toxin after 7 days at 20 to 25 C (2).

The objective of this study was to gather data on the incidence of C. botulinum spores in selected convenience food products.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Samples. Four types of commercially available convenience foods were used: (i) "boil-in-the-bag" foods, (ii) vacuum-packed foods, (iii) pressurized foods, and (iv) dehydrated and freeze-dried foods.
In each category, 100 samples were analyzed. A category was comprised of 10 different food prototypes (Table 1) from various manufacturers. Ten samples per food prototype were analyzed, a total of 400 samples.

**Preparation of samples.** All samples were divided into two equal portions. One portion was used for the unheated phase and the other for the heated phase. All portions equaled 175 ml after blending with Duff's medium (4). Pouches of boil-in-the-bag vegetables were cut in half while frozen. Each half was blended in 50 ml of Duff's medium. Dehydrated foods were reconstituted with lukewarm water and drained according to the manufacturer's specification. The vacuum-packed, pressurized, and reconstituted foods were divided into two equal portions, and each half was blended separately in 100 ml of Duff's medium.

**Treatment of samples.** One portion of a sample was added to an equal volume (175 ml) of Duff's medium in a sterile pint jar. The second portion was added to 175 ml of Duff's medium in a sterile pint jar and heated at 60 C for 15 min in a rotary water bath. It took approximately 3 to 6 min for the temperature to reach between 59 to 63 C. Additional quantities (2 to 5 ml) of Duff's medium were added to the jars, when necessary, to assure a minimal headspace. Samples were incubated at 28 C for 7 days in anaerobic jars. After 7 days of enrichment, the samples were frozen at 0 C until analyzed for toxins.

**Initial toxin analysis.** Samples were centrifuged at 2,500 rev/min at 4 C for 30 min. The supernatant fluid was decanted into sterile jars. A sample (10 ml) of the supernatant fluid was trypsinized at 37 C (3) for 1 hr. One-half of the trypsinized sample was diluted 1:10 with gelatin phosphate buffer. The other half was left undiluted. A portion (3 ml) of the supernatant fluid (untypsinized) was diluted 1:10 with gelatin phosphate buffer. Another 3 ml-portion was used undiluted.

Two mice were inoculated with 0.4 ml from each treatment. The mice were observed for 96 hr for botulogenic symptoms and deaths. The remaining supernatant fluid was frozen for further toxin confirmation.

**Antitoxin confirmation.** Samples that killed mice were taken from frozen storage. These were restested with antitoxin to confirm the presence of *C. botulinum* exotoxin and to identify the type. The highest dilution of the sample that produced death during the initial toxin analysis was used for testing with antitoxin.

**Preparation.** The supernatant fluid was divided into three equal portions. To the first portion, 0.1% trypsin was added and incubated at 37 C for 1 hr. The second portion received no trypsinization. The third portion was boiled for 10 min.

**Table 2. Confirmation in vacuum-packed frankfurters positive for *C. botulinum* spores, type B**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>Samples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No dilution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boiled</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Untrypsinized</td>
<td>00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trypsinized</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Results are expressed in terms of deaths (+) and survivals (0) of the test mice. Mice tested with toxins A, B, and E resulted in two deaths, two survivals, and two deaths, respectively.

**Table 1. Food prototypes examined for spores of *C. botulinum***

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boil-in-the-bag</th>
<th>Vacuum-packed foods</th>
<th>Pressurized foods</th>
<th>Dehydrated foods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asparagus cuts and</td>
<td>Lobster newburg</td>
<td>Ham slices</td>
<td>Cake decorator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tips, hollandaise</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>brands A, B,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>style</td>
<td>Shrimp newburg</td>
<td>Bologna</td>
<td>and C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby brussels sprouts</td>
<td>Crab newburg</td>
<td>Head cheese</td>
<td>Synthetic whipped</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut leaf spinach in</td>
<td>Chicken pot pie</td>
<td>Chicken slices</td>
<td>cream, brands A,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>butter sauce</td>
<td>filling</td>
<td>Turkey slices</td>
<td>B, C, D, and E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broccoli spears in</td>
<td>Chicken a la king</td>
<td>Frankfurters</td>
<td>Salad dressing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>butter sauce</td>
<td></td>
<td>Edam cheese</td>
<td>Cheese spread</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Results are expressed in terms of deaths (+) and survivals (0) of the test mice. Mice tested with toxins A, B, and E resulted in two deaths, two survivals, and two deaths, respectively.

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Inoculation. Samples of 1.2 ml of the trypsinized, untrypsinized, and boiled samples were mixed with 0.3 ml of monovalent antitoxin types A, B, and E, respectively (standard antitoxin obtained from the Public Health Service; 0.1 ml equal to 1 IU). These were allowed to react at room temperature for 30 min. Two mice were injected with 0.5 ml of each type of antitoxin and treatment sample. The toxin type was indicated by the antitoxin which protected the mice from death for 4 days from the time of inoculation.

RESULTS

One out of the 400 samples analyzed was positive for C. botulinum spores. Type B toxin was identified in vacuum-packed frankfurters. The unheated samples and both the trypsinized and untrypsinized portions were positive for botulinum exotoxin (Table 2).

DISCUSSION

Detection of C. botulinum spores in one of 400 samples examined demonstrated a low incidence rate. However, the isolation of type B spores from vacuum-packed frankfurters emphasized the need to refrigerate and to prevent abuse of vacuum-packed meats to eliminate a possible health hazard to the consumer. Reports on the risk of the development of toxin in vacuum-packed foods vary. According to Johanssen (8), the risk of toxin formation is dependent primarily on the product itself and not the packing. Kautter (9), in his study of smoked ciscoes inoculated with type E spores and held at 30 C, found that packages open to the air became toxic as rapidly as those in plastic, airtight packages. On the other hand, Thatcher et al. (17) reported that anaerobic packaging of foods may increase the food poisoning hazard by allowing the production of botulinum toxin, which would occur at refrigerator temperatures (13, 14).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank K. Lewis, R. Angelotti, and their staff at the National Center for Urban and Industrial Health, Cincinnati, Ohio, for their counsel on botulinum testing. We also thank the staff of the National Communicable Disease Center, Atlanta, Ga., for making available the diagnostic type E antiserum.

This investigation was supported by Public Health Service contract PH86-66-154.

LITERATURE CITED