



GARLIC-IN-OIL

The Issue

Garlic-in-oil is a popular homemade food item that can cause serious health problems if it is not stored properly. If you make and use this item at home, you can take steps to protect your family from the possibility of food poisoning.

Background

Garlic-in-oil is a mixture of vegetable oil and garlic, either whole, chopped or minced. When you make it at home and use it right away, it's a safe product. It's also safe if you keep it refrigerated on a continuous basis, and use it within a week.

The trouble starts if you store homemade garlic-in-oil at room temperature, or if you keep it in the fridge for too long. These actions could result in contamination of the product by the bacteria spores that cause botulism.

The Link Between Homemade Garlic-in-Oil and Botulism

The bacteria spores that cause botulism – *Clostridium Botulinum* – are widespread in nature, but they seldom cause problems because they can't grow if they're exposed to oxygen. If the spores don't grow, then they can't produce the toxins that make us sick.

However, when garlic containing the bacteria is covered with oil, there's no oxygen present. That means conditions are ripe for the spores to grow and produce toxins. You can slow down the growth of bacteria (and the production of toxins) by refrigerating the product, but this may not be enough to stop it from spoiling.

What's worse is that there won't be any obvious signs that the garlic-in-oil is spoiled. You won't be able to tell if it's dangerous, because it will still look, smell and taste the same.

If you eat garlic-in-oil that contains the toxins, you can get botulism – a potentially fatal food poisoning that may cause the following symptoms:

- Dizziness
- Blurred or double vision
- Difficulty in swallowing, breathing and speaking
- Paralysis that gets worse with time

Commercially Prepared Garlic-in-Oil

Commercially produced garlic-in-oil products have been linked to two outbreaks of botulism; one in Vancouver in 1985 and the other in New York in 1989.

In both outbreaks, people became seriously ill after eating something made with non-preserved garlic-in-oil that had not been stored at the proper temperature.

Since then, the commercial manufacturers of garlic-in-oil have adopted better preservation techniques to keep their products free of the toxins that cause botulism.

Check the label on commercially prepared garlic-in-oil products for sale. If salt or acids are in the list of ingredients, the product has been preserved. You don't need to worry about food poisoning as long as you follow directions for storing the product.

Health Canada's Initiatives

Health Canada continues to work closely with the food industry to ensure that commercially prepared garlic-in-oil products are safe. In addition, Health Canada is helping to get the word out to consumers about ways to make sure that homemade garlic-in-oil products are also safe.

If You make Garlic-in-Oil at Home

You can protect your family's health and reduce the chance of food poisoning by following these rules:

- Prepare garlic-in-oil fresh, and use it immediately.
- It's best to throw away any garlic-in-oil that's left-over. If you decide to store it, make sure it goes into the refrigerator right away, and use it within a week.
- Never store garlic-in-oil at room temperature. Throw away any that has been in the refrigerator for more than a week.

Need More Info?

For tips about the safe preparation of flavoured oils, look for a publication called "Put a Lid on It" (E. Topp, M. Howard, 1997 Macmillan, Canada).

For more information about the safety of any food product, contact your nearest Health Canada office.

Health Canada: Food Program

http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/food-aliment/e_index.html

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