

Listeriosis

FACTSHEET

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What is Listeriosis?

Listeriosis is a serious infection usually caused by eating food contaminated by the *Listeria monocytogenes* bacteria. The bacteria are found everywhere – in soil, plants, and ground water. Animals and humans can carry the bacteria without getting ill. Despite being widespread, most infections in humans result from eating contaminated foods.

Who gets Listeriosis?

Most persons are not at increased risk for listeriosis. Those at increased risk include pregnant women and their unborn, the elderly, and the immunocompromised due to cancer treatments, diabetes, kidney disease, AIDS, or other chronic conditions.

How does Listeriosis spread?

Most cases or outbreaks of listeriosis are caused by the ingestion of raw (unpasteurized) or contaminated milk, soft cheeses, contaminated vegetables, and ready to eat meats such as pâté. The organism can be transmitted from mother to fetus or during passage through the infected birth canal.

What are the symptoms of Listeriosis?

Symptoms may include nausea-vomiting, diarrhea, muscle aches. If the illness becomes more severe and spreads to the central nervous system, headache, confusion, loss of balance and convulsions could occur. A pregnant woman, infected with Listeriosis, may experience only mild flu like symptoms but could result in premature birth, miscarriage or stillbirth of the infant.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Symptoms may appear from 3 to 70 days after exposure; the average period is 3 weeks.

How is Listeriosis treated?

During pregnancy, antibiotics are given to treat listeriosis in the mother. The antibiotics may also prevent infection of the fetus or newborn. Antibiotics are also given to babies born with listeriosis.

What should pregnant women and “at-risk” persons do to prevent Listeriosis?

- Avoid eating hot dogs, luncheon meats, or deli meats unless they are reheated until steaming hot. Wash hands after handling.
- Drink only pasteurized milk or milk products.
- Avoid soft cheeses such as feta, Brie, Camembert, blue-veined cheeses, and Mexican style cheeses.
- Avoid refrigerated pâté or meat spreads. Canned or shelf-stable pâté and meat products can be eaten.
- Avoid refrigerated smoked seafood unless it is an ingredient in a cooked dish such as a casserole.

What should everyone do to prevent Listeriosis?

Listeria monocytogenes can grow at refrigeration temperatures of 40°F or below; therefore it is advisable to:

- Consume all perishable items and ready-to-eat items as soon as possible.
- Use a refrigerator thermometer to ensure the temperature always stays at 40°F or below.
- Clean refrigerators regularly.
- Wash raw vegetables thoroughly
- Thoroughly cook all raw food from animal sources

Want more information?

Additional information about Listeriosis and other related health care topics can be found at the website www.cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please call 202-442-9371.

Revised 04.05

