

# Fact Sheet

## Listeriosis



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### What is Listeriosis?



Listeriosis, a serious infection usually caused by eating food contaminated with the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*, is an important public health problem in the United States. The disease primarily affects older adults, pregnant women, newborns, and adults with weakened immune systems. However, rarely, persons without these risk factors can also be affected. The risk may be reduced by recommendations for safe food preparation, consumption, and storage.

### Spread of Disease

*Listeria monocytogenes* is commonly found in soil and water. Animals can carry the bacterium without appearing ill and can contaminate foods of animal origin, such as meats and dairy products.

People get listeriosis by eating food contaminated with *Listeria monocytogenes*. However, healthy people may consume contaminated foods without becoming ill. Babies can be born with listeriosis if their mothers eat contaminated food during pregnancy.

When *Listeria* bacteria get into a food processing factory, it can live there for years, sometimes contaminating food product. The bacterium has been found in a variety of foods, such as:

- Uncooked meats and vegetables
- Unpasteurized (raw) milk and cheeses as well as other foods made from unpasteurized milk
- Cooked or processed foods, including certain soft cheeses, processed (or ready-to-eat) meats, and smoked seafood

Unlike most bacteria, *Listeria* can grow and multiply in some foods in the refrigerator.

### Signs and Symptoms

A person with listeriosis usually has fever and muscle aches, sometimes preceded by diarrhea or other gastrointestinal symptoms. Almost everyone who is diagnosed with listeriosis has "invasive" infection, in which the bacteria spread beyond the gastrointestinal tract. The symptoms vary with the infected person:

- **Pregnant women:** Pregnant women typically experience fever and other non-specific symptoms, such as fatigue and aches. However, infections during pregnancy can lead to miscarriage, stillbirth, premature delivery, or life-threatening infection of the newborn.
- **People other than pregnant women:** Symptoms can include headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance, and convulsions in addition to fever and muscle aches.

### Diagnosis

If a person becomes very sick with fever and has muscle aches or stiff neck, or develops fever and chills while pregnant, consult a doctor immediately. A blood or spinal fluid test (to look for the bacteria) will show if a person has listeriosis.

## Treatment and Complications

Listeriosis is treated with antibiotics. A person in a higher-risk category (pregnant woman, older adults, and people with weakened immune systems) who experiences fever and other non-specific symptoms, such as fatigue and aches, within 2 months of eating contaminated food should seek medical care and tell the physician or health care provider about eating the contaminated food. Even with prompt treatment, some listeriosis cases result in death. This is particularly likely in older adults and in persons with other serious medical problems.

If a person has eaten food contaminated with *Listeria* and does not have any symptoms, most experts believe that no tests or treatment are needed, even for persons at higher risk for listeriosis.

## Who is at Risk?

*Listeria*, the third leading cause of death from food poisoning, targets pregnant women and their babies, people with weakened immune systems, and those 65 years or older. These hard-hit groups account for at least 90 percent of reported *Listeria* infections.

*Listeria* can pass from a pregnant woman to her fetus or newborn. It can cause miscarriage and stillbirth; in a newborn, it can cause bloodstream infection, meningitis, or death. The risk for pregnant women is ten times higher than for the general population. For Hispanic pregnant women, the risk is 24 times higher. More consumption of Mexican-style soft cheese, like queso fresco, may explain the higher rates among Hispanics.

## Prevention

General recommendations to prevent an infection with *Listeria*:

- Wash raw produce thoroughly before eating
- Wash hands, knives, countertops, and cutting boards after handling and preparing uncooked foods.
- Be aware that *Listeria monocytogenes* can grow in foods in the refrigerator. Use an appliance thermometer, such as a refrigerator thermometer, to check the temperature inside your refrigerator. The refrigerator should be 40°F or lower and the freezer 0°F or lower.
- Thoroughly cook raw food from animal sources, such as beef, pork, or poultry.
- Use precooked or ready-to-eat food as soon as you can. Do not store the product in the refrigerator beyond the use-by date; follow USDA refrigerator storage time guidelines:
  - Hot Dogs – store opened package no longer than 1 week and unopened package no longer than 2 weeks in the refrigerator.
  - Luncheon and Deli Meat – store factory sealed, unopened package no longer than 2 weeks. Store opened packages and meat sliced at a local deli no longer than 3 to 5 days in the refrigerator.
- Divide leftovers into shallow containers to promote rapid, even cooling. Cover with airtight lids or enclose in plastic wrap or aluminum foil. Use leftovers within 3 to 4 days.
- Do not drink raw (unpasteurized) milk, and do not eat foods that have unpasteurized milk in them.



**For more sources of information on this topic visit:**

ST. CLAIR COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT [www.scchealth.co](http://www.scchealth.co)

MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES [www.michigan.gov/mdhhs](http://www.michigan.gov/mdhhs)

CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

FOOD SAFETY [www.foodsafety.gov](http://www.foodsafety.gov)