

## LISTERIOSIS

### What is listeriosis?

Listeriosis is a foodborne illness caused by the bacteria *Listeria monocytogenes*. This disease can be very serious for pregnant women, people older than 65, and people with weakened immune systems. *Listeria* bacteria can also be found in soil, water, and animal feces, but it is commonly caused by eating improperly processed deli meats and unpasteurized milk products.

### Who gets listeriosis?

Anyone can get listeriosis. Listeriosis is usually a mild illness for pregnant women, but it causes severe disease in the fetus or newborn baby. Some people with *Listeria* infections, most commonly adults 65 years and older and people with weakened immune systems, develop severe infections of the bloodstream (causing sepsis) or brain (causing meningitis or encephalitis). *Listeria* infections can sometimes affect other parts of the body, including bones, joints, and sites in the chest and abdomen.

### How is listeriosis spread?

Listeriosis is usually caused by eating food contaminated with *Listeria monocytogenes*. If infection occurs during pregnancy, *Listeria* bacteria can spread to the baby through the placenta.

### What are the symptoms of listeriosis?

Listeriosis can cause a variety of symptoms, depending on the person and the part of the body affected. *Listeria* can cause fever and diarrhea similar to other foodborne germs, but invasive *Listeria* infection is rarely diagnosed. Symptoms in people with invasive listeriosis, meaning the bacteria has spread beyond the gut, depend on whether the person is pregnant.

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

### How soon do symptoms appear?

People with invasive listeriosis usually report symptoms starting one to four weeks after eating food contaminated with *Listeria*. Some people have reported symptoms starting as late as 70 days after exposure or as early as the same day of exposure.

## **Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?**

*Listeria* is not spread from person to person, so exclusion is not required.

## **What is the treatment for Listeriosis?**

Treatment involves antibiotics and supportive therapy. When infection occurs during pregnancy, antibiotics can often prevent infection of the fetus or newborn.

## **What can a person or community do to prevent the spread of listeriosis?**

- Avoid high risk foods, including:
  - queso fresco and other soft cheeses
  - raw sprouts
  - melons
  - smoked fish
  - raw unpasteurized milk.
- Thoroughly cook meat (beef, lamb, pork, and wild game) as well as poultry (chicken, turkey, and duck).
- Wash raw vegetables and fruit thoroughly before eating.
- Keep raw meat separate from vegetables, cooked foods, and ready-to-eat foods. (Do not allow the blood from raw meat to come into contact with other food.)
- Use separate cutting boards for raw meat and foods that are ready to eat (for example, cooked foods and salads).
- Wash your hands before and after preparing food.
- Wash knives and cutting boards after handling uncooked foods.
- Wash your hands after handling animals.
- Perishable foods should be stored in a cold (less than 5 degrees C and 41 degrees Fahrenheit) refrigerator and be washed and eaten as soon as possible.

## **Resources**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/listeria/index.html>