

Food Safety Fact Sheet

Foodborne Illness: Listeriosis

What is listeriosis?

Listeriosis is a foodborne illness caused by the bacteria *Listeria monocytogenes*. It may cause few or no symptoms in healthy people, but it can cause serious illness in people with immune system problems, the elderly and pregnant women. People typically get listeriosis by eating food contaminated with the bacteria *L. monocytogenes*. Some types of soft cheeses, undercooked poultry, hot dogs not thoroughly reheated, foods from deli counters, and other ready-to-eat foods are responsible for most reported cases.

What are the symptoms?

Healthy people may not have noticeable symptoms. For others, symptoms include fever, fatigue, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. If left untreated, listeriosis can lead to meningitis (brain infection) and bacteria in the bloodstream. Pregnant women may develop flu-like symptoms with complications resulting in miscarriage, stillbirth, or meningitis in their newborn baby. In older children and adults, listeriosis may attack the central nervous system and bloodstream, causing pneumonia and inflammation of the lining of the heart and valves. Abscesses or skin lesions may also appear. Although flu-like symptoms may occur 12 hours after eating contaminated food, it usually takes from 1 to 6 weeks for a serious case of listeriosis to develop. The time it takes for symptoms to appear depends on the person's age and general health, the strain of *L. monocytogenes*, and how much bacteria was eaten.

How can listeriosis be prevented?

Although most people are at very low risk for listeriosis, the risk of this and other foodborne illnesses can be reduced by following the tips listed below:

- Avoid using or drinking unpasteurized milk.
- Keep raw and cooked foods separate when shopping, preparing, cooking and storing foods. Bacteria in juices from raw meat, poultry and fish can contaminate cooked food.
- Wash your hands, knives and cutting boards after handling uncooked foods.

- Wash raw vegetables well before eating them.
- Thoroughly cook meat, poultry, eggs and fish.
- Read and follow directions on foods to keep them properly refrigerated. Do not use foods after their expiration date.
- Keep hot foods hot and cold foods cold. Do not keep them unrefrigerated longer than 2 hours.
- Place leftovers in shallow, covered containers and refrigerate them immediately.
- Keep your refrigerator clean, and the temperature between 34°F and 40°F.

Pregnant women, the elderly, and people who have weakened immune systems can reduce their risk by following the tips below:

- Avoid soft cheeses such as Mexican style (soft, white ethnic cheeses), feta, Brie, Camembert and blue cheese. There is no need to avoid hard cheeses, processed slices, cottage cheese or yogurt.
- Reheat leftover foods and ready-to-eat foods such as hot dogs until they are steaming hot.
- Although the risk of listeriosis from deli counter foods is relatively low, avoid these foods and thoroughly reheat cold cuts before eating them.

How great is the risk for listeriosis?

In the United States, an estimated 2,500 persons become seriously ill with listeriosis each year. Of these, 500 die. At increased risk are:

- Pregnant women are about 20 times more likely than other healthy adults to get listeriosis. About one-third of listeriosis cases happen during pregnancy.
- Newborns – Newborns rather than the pregnant women themselves suffer the serious effects of infection in pregnancy.
- Persons with weakened immune systems
- Persons with cancer, diabetes, or kidney disease
- Persons with AIDS are almost 300 times more likely to get listeriosis than people with normal immune systems.
- Persons who take glucocorticosteroid medications
- The elderly