

Listeria

What is Listeriosis?

Listeriosis is a serious infection usually caused by eating food contaminated with the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*. The disease primarily affects older adults, pregnant women, newborns, and adults with weakened immune systems. People with healthy immune systems can also become ill but the occurrence is rare.

What are the symptoms of illness caused by Listeria?

A person with Listeriosis usually experiences diarrhea or vomiting followed by fever and muscle aches. Most people diagnosed with Listeriosis develop an invasive infection, as a result of the bacteria spreading beyond the gastrointestinal tract. In older adults or people with weakened immune systems an infection can result in septicemia or meningitis. People with strong immune systems may experience acute gastroenteritis with a fever or no symptoms at all.

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

How do you get Listeriosis?

Most people get Listeriosis by eating food contaminated with Listeria. Babies can be born with Listeriosis if their mothers eat contaminated food during pregnancy.

Where does Listeria come from and how does it get into food?

Listeria monocytogenes is found in soil and water. Vegetables can become contaminated from the soil or from manure used as fertilizer. Healthy appearing animals can carry the bacterium and can contaminate foods of animal origin such as meats and dairy products.

Listeria bacteria can get into a food processing facilities and live there for years, sometimes contaminating food products. Unlike most bacteria, *Listeria* can grow and multiply in some foods in the refrigerator.

How soon do Listeria infection symptoms occur?

The time between ingesting the bacteria and feeling sick is called the "incubation period." The incubation period for Listeria is variable, ranging from 3 to 70 days.

How serious is Listeriosis?

Even with prompt treatment, some Listeriosis cases result in death. This is particularly likely in older adults and in persons with other serious medical conditions.

How are Listeria infections diagnosed?

For people with symptoms of Listeriosis, diagnosis is confirmed only after isolation of *Listeria monocytogenes* from blood, spinal fluid, or amniotic fluid/placenta (in pregnancy).

What is treatment for Listeria infections?

Listeriosis is treated with antibiotics.

How common are Listeria infections?

CDC estimates that approximately 1,600 illnesses and 260 deaths due to *Listeria* occur annually in the United States. In the Louisiana, *L. monocytogenes* infection is estimated to cause 40 to 50 serious illnesses and 5 to 10 deaths each year.

I ate a food possibly contaminated with Listeria, what should I do?

If a person has eaten food contaminated with *Listeria* and does not have any symptoms, experts believe that no tests or treatment are needed, even for people at higher risk for Listeriosis. Concerned people should discuss this further with their physician.

The incubation period for *Listeria* infection is typically a few days to one month, but can be up to 70 days for pregnant women. A person who ate a product recalled because of *Listeria* contamination should consult a health care provider if he or she develops symptoms after eating the recalled product.

Can Listeria infections be prevented?

Special Recommendations for persons at higher risk (pregnant women, persons with weakened immune systems, and older adults):

For people at a higher risk of infection, Listeria infections can be prevented by avoiding eating foods that have been associated with Listeria infections and outbreaks.

Meats

- Avoid eating hot dogs, luncheon meats, cold cuts, other deli meats (e.g., bologna), or fermented or dry sausages, unless they are heated to an internal temperature of 165°F, or until steaming hot just before serving.
- Avoid getting fluid from hot dog and lunch meat packages on other foods, utensils, and food prepa-

ration surfaces, and wash hands after handling hot dogs, luncheon meats, and deli meats.

- Avoid eating refrigerated pâté or meat spreads from a deli or meat counter, or from the refrigerated section of a store. Foods that do not need refrigeration, like canned or shelf-stable pâté and meat spreads, are safe to eat. Refrigerate after opening.

Soft Cheeses

- Avoid eating soft cheeses such as feta, queso blanco, queso fresco, brie, Camembert, blue-veined, or panela (queso panela) unless it is labeled as made with pasteurized milk. Make sure the label says, "MADE WITH PASTEURIZED MILK."
- Mexican-style cheeses made from pasteurized milk, such as queso fresco, likely contaminated during cheese-making, have caused *Listeria* infections.

Seafood

- Avoid eating refrigerated smoked seafood, such as salmon, trout, whitefish, cod, tuna, and mackerel unless it is in a cooked dish, such as a casserole, or is in a canned shelf stable product. Refrigerated smoked seafood is most often labeled as "nova-style," "lox," "kippered," "smoked," or "jerky". These fish are typically found in the refrigerator section or sold at seafood and deli counters of grocery stores and delicatessens.
- Canned and shelf-stable tuna, salmon, and other fish products are safe to eat.

General prevention recommendations:

The additional guidelines are recommended for everyone to prevent *Listeria* infections and other foodborne illnesses.

- **Rinse** raw produce, such as fruits and vegetables, thoroughly under running tap water before eating, cutting, or cooking. Even if the produce will be peeled, it should still be washed first.
- **Scrub** firm produce, such as melons and cucumbers, with a clean produce brush.
- **Dry** the produce with a clean cloth or paper towel.
- **Separate** uncooked meats and poultry from vegetables, cooked foods, and ready-to-eat foods.
- Wash hands, knives, countertops, and cutting boards after handling and preparing uncooked foods.
- *Listeria monocytogenes* can grow in foods in the refrigerator. Keep your refrigerator at 40°F or lower and the freezer at 0°F or lower.
- Clean up all spills in your refrigerator right away—especially juices from hot dog and lunch meat packages, raw meat, and raw poultry.
- Clean the inside walls and shelves of your refrigerator with hot water and liquid soap, then rinse.
- Thoroughly cook raw food from animal sources, such as beef, pork, or poultry to a safe internal temperature.

- 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.
- 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.