
Listeriosis

What is listeriosis?

Listeriosis is a serious infection caused by eating food contaminated with the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*.

What are the symptoms of listeriosis?

Symptoms include fever, muscle aches, and sometimes nausea and vomiting. If the infection spreads to the nervous system, symptoms can include headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance, or convulsions. Pregnant women who become infected may experience only a mild flu-like illness; however, infections during pregnancy can lead to miscarriage or stillbirth, premature delivery, or infection of the newborn.

How great is the risk for listeriosis?

In the United States an estimated 2,500 people become seriously ill with listeriosis each year. Of these, 500 die. Those at increased risk of getting listeriosis include:

- Pregnant women
- Newborns
- People with a weakened immune system
- People with cancer, diabetes, or kidney disease
- People with AIDS
- People who take glucocorticosteroid medications
- The elderly

Healthy adults and children occasionally become infected with *Listeria*, but they rarely become seriously ill.

How does *Listeria* get into food?

The *Listeria* bacteria is found in soil and water. Vegetables can become contaminated from the soil or from manure used as fertilizer. Animals can carry *Listeria monocytogenes* without

appearing ill and can contaminate foods of animal origin such as meats and dairy products. The bacterium has been found in a variety of raw foods, such as uncooked meats and vegetables, as well as in processed foods that become contaminated after processing, such as soft cheeses and cold cuts. Unpasteurized (raw) milk or foods made from unpasteurized milk may contain the bacterium also. Although *Listeria* is killed by pasteurization or cooking, processed foods may become contaminated after cooking but before packaging.

How does a person get listeriosis?

A person gets listeriosis by eating food contaminated with *Listeria*. Babies can be born with listeriosis if their mothers eat contaminated food during pregnancy. Although healthy persons may consume contaminated foods without becoming ill, those at increased risk for infection can get listeriosis after eating food contaminated with even a few bacteria.

How do I avoid getting listeriosis?

General recommendations to prevent listeriosis include:

- Thoroughly cook raw food from animal sources, such as beef, pork, or poultry.
- Wash raw vegetables thoroughly before eating.
- Keep uncooked meats separate from vegetables and from cooked foods and ready-to-eat foods.
- Avoid unpasteurized (raw) milk or foods made from unpasteurized milk such as cheese.
- Wash hands, knives, and cutting boards after handling uncooked foods.
- Consume perishable and ready-to-eat foods as soon as possible.

Recommendations for people at high risk for listeriosis, such as pregnant women and those with

weakened immune systems, in addition to the above recommendations, include:

- Do not eat hot dogs, luncheon meats, or deli meats, unless they are reheated until steaming hot.
- Wash hands after handling hot dogs, luncheon meats, and deli meats.
- Do not eat soft cheeses, such as feta, Brie, and Camembert, blue-veined cheeses, or Mexican-style cheeses such as queso blanco, queso fresco, and Panela, unless they have labels clearly stating they are made from pasteurized milk.
- Do not eat refrigerated pâtés or meat spreads. Canned or shelf-stable pâtés and meat spreads may be eaten.
- Do not eat refrigerated, smoked seafood, unless it is contained in a cooked dish, such as a casserole. Refrigerated, smoked seafood, such as salmon, trout, whitefish, cod, tuna, or mackerel, is most often labeled as “novastyle,” “lox,” “kippered,” “smoked,” or “jerky.” The fish is found in the refrigerator section or sold at deli counters of grocery stores and delicatessens. Canned or shelf-stable smoked seafood may be eaten.

How is listeriosis diagnosed?

There is no routine screening test for susceptibility to listeriosis during pregnancy, as there is for some other congenital infections. If you have symptoms such as fever or stiff neck, consult your doctor. A blood or spinal fluid test (to cultivate the bacteria) will show if you have listeriosis. During pregnancy, a blood test is the most reliable way to find out if your symptoms are due to listeriosis.

What should I do if I find out I’ve eaten a food recalled because of *Listeria* contamination?

The risk of an individual person developing *Listeria* infection after consumption of a contaminated product is very small. If you have eaten a contaminated product and do not have any symptoms, we do not recommend that you have any tests or treatment, even if you are in a high-risk group. However, if you are in a high-risk group, have eaten a contaminated product, and within 2 months become ill with fever or signs of

serious illness, you should contact your physician and inform him or her about the exposure.

Can listeriosis be treated?

When infection occurs during pregnancy, antibiotics given promptly to the pregnant woman can often prevent infection of the fetus or newborn. Babies with listeriosis receive the same antibiotics as adults, although a combination of antibiotics is often used until physicians are certain of the diagnosis. Even with prompt treatment, some infections result in death. This is particularly likely in the elderly and in persons with other serious medical problems.

What actions have been taken to safeguards people against listeriosis?

Government agencies and the food industry have taken steps to reduce contamination of food by the *Listeria* bacterium. When a processed food is found to be contaminated, food monitoring and plant inspection are intensified, and if necessary, the implicated food is recalled. In New Hampshire, the Department of Health and Human Services, Communicable Disease Control and Surveillance Section is responsible for investigating cases of listeriosis, and the Bureau of Food Protection is responsible for monitoring the safety of food in the State.

For specific concerns or questions about listeriosis, call the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services, Bureau of Infectious Disease Control at 603-271-4496 or 800-852-3345 x4496. For further information, refer to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov or the NH Department of Health and Human Services website at www.dhhs.nh.gov.