

Listeriosis

This is a bacterial infection caused by *Listeria monocytogenes*.

These bacteria are widespread in nature, being found in soil, decaying vegetation and the bowels of many mammals. People are probably frequently exposed to *Listeria*, with only mild illness resulting. However, infection is more serious when it occurs in new born babies, the elderly, immune suppressed people and pregnant women.

Symptoms may include:

- > sudden onset of fever
- > headache
- > backache
- > nausea, vomiting
- > neck stiffness
- > gradual onset of confusion, decreased alertness.

Pregnant women may have relatively mild symptoms (fever and aches) and make a quick recovery. However, they may transfer the infection to their unborn child who may be stillborn or born very ill.

The diagnosis is made by growing the bacteria from a sample of cerebrospinal fluid (fluid from around the brain and spinal cord), blood or from samples taken from the baby.

The main way in which *Listeria* infection is spread is by eating contaminated foods. Unlike most bacteria, *Listeria* tends to multiply in refrigerated foods, if they have been contaminated. Foods associated with the spread of *Listeria* include:

- > Cold meats:
 - unpackaged ready-to-eat from delicatessen counters, sandwich bars, etc
 - packaged, sliced ready-to-eat
- > Cold cooked chicken: purchased (whole, portions or diced) ready-to-eat
- > Pâté: refrigerated pâté or meat spreads
- > Salads (fruit and vegetables): pre-prepared or pre-packaged salads e.g. salad bars, smorgasbords etc

- > Chilled seafood:
 - raw seafood (e.g. oysters, sashimi or sushi)
 - smoked ready-to-eat seafood
 - ready-to-eat peeled prawns (cooked)
 - e.g. in prawn cocktails, sandwich fillings and prawn salads
- > Cheese: soft, semi-soft and surface ripened cheeses (pre-packaged and delicatessen)
 - e.g. brie, camembert, ricotta, feta and blue
- > Ice cream: soft serve
- > Other unpasteurised dairy products (e.g. raw goat's milk).

Contact with infected farm animals, particularly stillborn animals, can also spread the infection.

Incubation period

(time between becoming infected and developing symptoms)

Varies from 3 – 70 days. Average 3 weeks.

Infectious period

(time during which an infected person can infect others)

Except for transmission from a pregnant woman to her foetus, person-to-person spread does not occur.

Treatment

Admission to hospital is usually necessary and antibiotic therapy is given.

Control of spread

- > Pregnant women and immune suppressed people should take special care to avoid foods which may be contaminated with *Listeria*. They should follow these guidelines:
 - Eat freshly cooked or freshly prepared foods.
 - Eat well washed, freshly prepared fruit and vegetables.
 - Cook foods thoroughly, especially meats.

Listeriosis (cont.)

Control of spread cont.

- Reheat foods to 'steaming' hot.
 - Make safer food choices. Avoid higher risk foods (as noted above).
 - Avoid ready-to-eat food from salad bars, sandwich bars, delicatessens and smorgasbords.
 - Avoid foods that are past their 'best before' or 'use by' date.
 - Only buy ready-to-eat hot food if it is steaming hot.
 - If eating out, order hot meals.
 - After handling uncooked food, wash hands, knives and cutting boards with detergent and hot water.
 - Avoid the use of untreated manure on vegetable crops which will be eaten raw.
- > Pregnant women and immune suppressed people should avoid contact with sick or stillborn farm animals.



Listeriosis is a notifiable disease

- > **Preventing Food Poisoning at Home**

Useful website

- > **Food Standards Australia and New Zealand**
<http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/foodmatters/listeria/index.cfm>