

Listeriosis (*Listeria monocytogenes*)

What is it?

Listeriosis is a rare, but serious infection caused by eating food contaminated with the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*. The disease affects primarily people in high-risk groups: older adults (65 and older), adults with weakened immune systems, people who are pregnant and their newborns.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of invasive illness usually start within 2 weeks after eating food contaminated with *Listeria*. Invasive means bacteria have spread beyond the intestines (gut). Common symptoms of invasive listeriosis include fever, muscle aches, fatigue, headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance, and seizures.

Symptoms during pregnancy may include a mild, influenza-like illness (or no symptoms); however, infection during pregnancy usually lead to miscarriage, stillbirth, premature delivery, or life-threatening infection of the newborn.

Listeria can also cause an intestinal illness with symptoms of diarrhea and vomiting. This kind of illness is usually mild and is rarely diagnosed because laboratories do not regularly test patient samples for *Listeria*. People who are not in the high-risk groups rarely become seriously ill.

What should I do if I have symptoms?

Contact your health care provider. Listeriosis is generally diagnosed by culturing blood or spinal fluid for the bacterium. Antibiotics may be used to treat the infection.

How is it spread?

Listeria is naturally found in the environment, soil, and animals. Animals can carry the bacterium without appearing ill.

Listeria can be found in a variety of raw foods, such as uncooked meats and vegetables. Unpasteurized (raw) milk or foods made from unpasteurized milk may contain *Listeria*. Processed foods may also become contaminated with *Listeria* after processing. You can get listeriosis by eating foods contaminated with *Listeria*. Newborns can be born with listeriosis if they are exposed in utero.

How can I reduce the risk of developing listeriosis?

If you are in a high-risk group (adults 65 and older, during pregnancy, people with weakened immune systems), choose safer foods to protect your health or your pregnancy:

- **Do not eat raw** (unpasteurized) soft cheeses, such as queso fresco and brie. Pasteurized soft cheeses heated until steaming hot (at least 165°F) may be eaten. Hard cheeses made with pasteurized milk (such as cheddar and parmesan) may be eaten. Cottage cheese, cream cheese, string cheese, feta, and mozzarella made with pasteurized milk may be eaten.
- **Do not eat** cheeses sliced at a deli **unless** they are reheated until steaming hot (at least 165°F).
- **Do not eat** deli meat, cold cuts, hot dogs, and fermented or dry sausages **unless** they are reheated until steaming hot (at least 165°F).

- **Do not eat** premade deli salads, such as coleslaw and potato, tuna, or chicken salad.
 - **Do not eat** raw or lightly cooked sprouts **unless** they are reheated until steaming hot (at least 165°F).
 - **Do not eat** cut melon left out for more than 2 hours (1 hour if it's exposed to temperatures hotter than 90°F, such as a picnic or hot car) or cut melon in refrigerator for more than a week. Melon that has just been cut may be eaten.
 - **Do not drink** raw (unpasteurized) milk and **do not eat** foods that contain unpasteurized milk such as yogurt or ice cream.
 - **Do not eat** refrigerated smoked seafood **unless** it is an ingredient in a cooked dish, such as a casserole. Canned or shelf-stable smoked seafood may be eaten.
 - **Do not eat** refrigerated pâtés and meat spreads. Canned or shelf-stable pâtés and meat spreads may be eaten.
- Wash raw fruits and vegetables before eating them.
 - Refrigerate foods as soon as possible. Remember, "When in doubt, throw it out."
 - Use a refrigerator thermometer to make sure the temperature in your refrigerator stays at or below 40°F.
 - Clean your refrigerator regularly.
 - Wash your hands with warm, soapy water for 20 seconds
 - After using the bathroom
 - After changing diapers
 - After touching animals
 - Before eating

To report a suspected foodborne illness, call the Minnesota Department of Health Foodborne Illness Hotline at 1-877-FOOD-ILL (or 651-201-5655)

General recommendations to prevent listeriosis:

- Check for recalled foods and do not eat them
- Thoroughly cook meats including beef, pork, and poultry.
- Separate raw meats, poultry, and seafood from vegetables and cooked foods.
- Prevent cross-contamination in the kitchen by washing hands, cutting boards, countertops, knives, utensils, and other surfaces after handling raw foods.

Minnesota Department of Health
Infectious Disease Epidemiology, Prevention and Control Division
625 Robert St N
PO Box 64975
St. Paul, MN 55164-0975
651-201-5414

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To obtain this information in a different format, call: 651-201-5414.