

LISTERIOSIS Q&A

What is listeriosis?

Listeriosis is a serious infection caused by eating food contaminated with the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*. Most people do not get listeriosis even when exposed to the bacteria. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, an estimated 2500 persons become seriously ill with listeriosis in the United States each year. Of these, approximately 500 die.

Who gets listeriosis?

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

Persons at greatest risk for serious illness include:

- Pregnant women and their unborn babies
- Newborn babies
- The elderly
 - Anyone whose immune system has been weakened by disease or illness, for example:
 - Cancer
 - Leukemia
 - Diabetes
 - AIDS
 - Persons with liver or kidney disease
 - Anyone on medication such as prednisone or cortisone or cyclosporine, since this can also suppress the immune system. Organ transplant patients frequently take these medications and are at high risk.

How is listeriosis spread?

Animals can carry *Listeria monocytogenes* in their intestines and may not become sick. As a result, the bacteria may be spread through meat and dairy products. Humans can get listeriosis when they eat food contaminated with *Listeria monocytogenes*. When mothers eat contaminated food during the first or second trimester of pregnancy, *Listeria* infection may lead to miscarriage and stillbirth. Maternal infection during the third trimester of pregnancy can lead to premature delivery and/or listeriosis in the baby following birth.

What are the symptoms of listeriosis?

Healthy people may not be affected at all. In persons at risk, symptoms may include fever, headache, tiredness, aches and pains. Sometimes infected people have diarrhea, nausea and stomach cramps, but this is less common. The illness may progress to a more serious form, such as meningitis (brain infection) and septicemia (blood poisoning).

In pregnant women, *Listeria* infection is usually a mild illness. A high temperature before or during labor may be the only sign. However, even a mild form of the illness can affect the unborn baby and can lead to miscarriage, stillbirth, premature birth or a very ill baby at birth.

How soon do symptoms appear after exposure?

This varies widely. It may take anywhere from 3 days to 10 weeks for someone to become ill after being exposed.

When and for how long is a person able to spread Listeria?

Infected individuals may shed *Listeria* in stools for several months. Mothers of infected newborns may shed *Listeria* for approximately 7-10 days after delivery.

What is the treatment for listeriosis?

When infection occurs during pregnancy, prompt administration of antibiotics 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.

How can listeriosis be prevented?

- Cook thoroughly 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 food and ready-to-eat foods.
- Avoid raw (unpasteurized) milk or foods made from raw milk.
- Wash hands, knives, and cutting boards after each handling of uncooked foods.

Persons at high risk for infection, including pregnant women and persons with weakened immune systems, should observe the following additional recommendations:

- Avoid soft cheeses such as feta, Brie, Camembert, blue-veined, and Mexican-style cheese.
- Cook left-over foods or ready-to-eat foods (e.g., hot dogs) until steaming hot
- Although the risk of listeriosis associated with foods from deli counters is relatively low, pregnant women and immunosuppressed persons may choose to avoid these foods or thoroughly reheat cold cuts before eating.

Where can I get additional information about listeriosis?

Contact the Georgia Division of Public Health, Epidemiology Branch, by email at gaepinfo@dhr.state.ga.us. You may also call the United States Department of Agriculture's Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-800-535-4555. The following web sites may be useful:

- CDC Listeriosis Fact Sheet – http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/listeriosis_g.htm
- FDA Bad Bug Book – <http://vm.cfsan.fda.gov/~mow/chap6.html>
- Food Safety and Inspection Service – <http://www.fsis.usda.gov/>

