

## LISTERIOSIS

### What is Listeriosis?

Listeriosis is a serious infection usually associated with eating food contaminated with the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*.

### Where are these bacteria found?

### How does it get into food?

*Listeria monocytogenes* can frequently be found in the environment, especially in water, mud and silage. It may also be present in the intestines of humans and animals, unpasteurized milk, soil, leafy vegetables and food processing environments. Animals can carry the bacteria without appearing ill. Outbreaks of listeriosis have been associated with ingestion of unpasteurized milk and dairy products made from unpasteurized or inadequately pasteurized milk. Animals carrying the bacteria can be the source of contamination of these food products. If these food products are not cooked properly or pasteurized, the bacteria can cause illness when a person eats the contaminated product. Outbreaks have also been associated with raw vegetables or products made with raw vegetables, including fresh vegetables fertilized with untreated manure. The bacteria is not passed from person to person.

### Who gets listeriosis?

Anyone can get Listeriosis, but the greatest risk for disease is among the elderly, pregnant women, or those with weakened immune systems. Pregnant women may only experience mild illness but can pass the infection on to their fetuses.

### What are the symptoms?

In normal adults, Listeriosis causes a “flu-like” illness including the sudden onset of fever, chills, headache, backache, and occasionally abdominal pain, nausea and diarrhea. Serious complications such as convulsions, confusion and coma can occur. Newborns may experience respiratory distress (trouble breathing), irritability, refusal to drink, and vomiting. More serious complications in newborn babies can include meningitis (inflammation of the tissues around the brain and spine) and septicemia (blood poisoning). During pregnancy the mother may only experience mild, “flu-like” symptoms but the infection can lead to infection of the newborn, premature delivery and stillbirths.

## How long after exposure do symptoms occur?

During outbreaks, cases have occurred between 3-70 days after eating a contaminated product. The average time between exposure and illness is estimated to be approximately three weeks.

## How is Listeriosis diagnosed?

The diagnosis is confirmed by finding the bacteria in the spinal fluid, blood and other sites of infection.

## How is Listeriosis treated?

Specific antibiotics can be prescribed by a physician for the treatment of Listeriosis. Antibiotics given to pregnant women with Listeriosis can often prevent the fetus from being infected.

## What can be done to prevent Listeriosis?

Eat only meats that have been properly cooked. Avoid deli meats, processed meats such as bologna or uncooked hotdogs. Wash fresh vegetables thoroughly and avoid organic vegetables fertilized with “untreated” manure. Avoid unpasteurized (raw) milk and cheese or other dairy products made from unpasteurized milk. Pregnant women and other groups at risk are advised to follow “keep refrigerated” labels and observe “sell by” and “use by” dates on processed products. Women who develop “flu-like” symptoms during pregnancy should see their physician. Avoid contact with potentially infected livestock and especially infected animal material such as aborted fetuses.

Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services  
Communicable Disease Fact Sheet