

Listeriosis

Fact Sheet



Paul R. LePage, Governor

Maine Center for Disease
Control and Prevention

An Office of the
Department of Health and Human Services

Mary C. Mayhew, Commissioner

What is listeriosis?

Listeriosis is an illness caused by eating food contaminated with the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*. The disease mostly affects pregnant women, newborns, and adults with weakened immune systems.

How do you get listeriosis?

You get listeriosis by eating food contaminated with the *Listeria* bacteria. Babies can be born with listeriosis if their mothers become infected during pregnancy.

What are the symptoms of listeriosis?

Symptoms of listeriosis may include:

- Fever
- Muscle aches
- Nausea
- Diarrhea

If infection spreads to the nervous system, symptoms such as headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance, or convulsions can occur.

Infected pregnant women may have only a mild, flu-like illness. However, infections during pregnancy can lead to miscarriage, stillbirth, premature delivery, or infection of the newborn.

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

How do you know if you have listeriosis?

Speak with your healthcare provider if you have symptoms of listeriosis. During pregnancy, a blood test is the best way to find out if your symptoms are due to listeriosis. If your symptoms include headache and stiff neck, a blood or spinal fluid test will show if you have listeriosis.

Can listeriosis be treated?

Listeriosis is treated with antibiotics. However, even with treatment, some infections result in death. The elderly and persons with serious

medical problems are more likely to become seriously ill from listeriosis.

How does *Listeria* get into food?

Listeria monocytogenes is found in soil and water. Vegetables can become contaminated from the soil or from manure used as fertilizer. Animals can carry the bacteria without looking ill and can contaminate foods such as meats and dairy products. Processed foods such as cold cuts and soft cheeses can become contaminated after processing. The bacteria can also be found in unpasteurized (raw) milk or foods made with raw milk.

Listeria is killed by pasteurization and cooking. However, in certain ready-to-eat foods such as hot dogs and deli meats, contamination may occur after cooking but before packaging.

How common is listeriosis?

In the United States, an estimated 2,500 persons become seriously ill with listeriosis each year. Of these, 500 may die.

Persons at increased risk of listeriosis include:

- Pregnant women - They are about 20 times more likely than other healthy adults to get listeriosis.
- Newborns - Newborns rather than the pregnant women themselves suffer the serious effects of infection in pregnancy
- Persons with weakened immune systems
- Persons with cancer, diabetes, or kidney disease
- Persons with AIDS - They are almost 300 times more likely to get listeriosis than people with healthy immune systems
- Persons who take steroids
- The elderly

How can you reduce your risk for listeriosis?

In general:

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

Persons at high risk of infection, such as pregnant women and persons with weakened immune systems should follow the following recommendations in addition to those above:

- Do not eat hot dogs, lunch meats, or deli meats, unless they are reheated until steaming hot.
- Avoid getting juices from hot dog packages on other foods, utensils, and kitchen surfaces. Wash hands after touching hot dogs, lunch 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 that clearly state 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 "nova-style," "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.

Listeriosis in Maine

Listeriosis is relatively uncommon in Maine, but at least a couple cases are reported each year. For specific information on the number of listeriosis cases reported in Maine, please visit the Maine CDC website:

<http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/boh/newpubs.htm>

and refer to the Infectious Epidemiology Program Documents.

Where can I get more information?

For more information contact your healthcare provider or local health center. You can also contact the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention by calling 1-800-821-5821. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website - <http://www.cdc.gov> - is another excellent source of health information.