

Listeriosis

Frequently Asked Questions

What is listeriosis?

Listeriosis (list-eer-ee-oh-sis) is a serious illness caused by eating food contaminated with the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*. Illnesses due to *Listeria* typically occur as individual cases but can also occur as outbreaks affecting many people within a given time period.

Who gets listeriosis?

In the United States, about 2,500 people become seriously ill with listeriosis each year. New Jersey reports an average of 35 listeriosis cases annually. Although it is possible for anyone to become infected with *Listeria*, some people are at greater risk including:

- **Pregnant women** – They are about 20 times more likely than other healthy adults to get listeriosis. About a third of listeriosis cases happen during pregnancy. *Listeria* infection can cause premature delivery, miscarriage or stillbirth.
- **Newborns** – Babies can be born with a *Listeria* infection if their mothers ate contaminated food during pregnancy.
- **People with weak immune systems**
- **People with cancer, diabetes, or kidney disease**
- **People with AIDS** – They are almost 300 times more likely to get listeriosis than people with normal immune systems.
- **People who take steroid medications**
- **The elderly**

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

How is listeriosis spread?

There are three primary ways that people get infected with *Listeria*:

- Eating contaminated food
- Pregnant women passing the infection to unborn children
- Contact with infected animals

Listeria bacteria are killed by pasteurization and cooking. Food commonly associated with listeriosis are:

- Raw fruits and vegetables
- Uncooked meats
- Processed ready-to-eat foods such as hot dogs and deli meats (cold cuts, lunch meats, etc.)
- Unpasteurized (raw) milk or foods made from raw milk
- Soft cheeses

What are the symptoms of listeriosis?

Listeriosis can affect different body organs and cause a wide variety of symptoms. Usual symptoms are flu-like including fever, muscle aches, and sometimes nausea and diarrhea. If the infection involves the central nervous system (brain and/or spinal cord), it may cause headaches, stiff neck, confusion and/or convulsions. Pregnant women with listeriosis may experience only mild flu-like illness, but the unborn child suffers the serious effects of the infection.

Symptoms generally occur about 3 weeks after coming into contact with *Listeria* bacteria, but symptoms may occur as quickly as 3 days or as long as 2 months.

How is listeriosis diagnosed?

If a health care provider suspects listeriosis, samples of the patient's blood and/or spinal fluid will be examined for the presence of the *Listeria* bacterium. There is no screening test for pregnant women to see if they are susceptible to *Listeria* infection. Therefore if you are pregnant and have any symptoms of listeriosis, see a health care provider immediately.

What is the treatment for listeriosis?

There are several antibiotics that are effective against this bacterium. However, *Listeria* infection affecting the central nervous system can be fatal even if the patient is treated with antibiotics. This is particularly likely in the elderly and in people with other serious medical problems. Early diagnosis and rapid use of antibiotics are critical for a successful recovery. When infection occurs during pregnancy, antibiotics given promptly to the pregnant woman 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. (NOTE- it is very important to finish your antibiotics, even if you begin to feel better, unless otherwise directed by your health care provider.)

Can people with listeriosis pass the illness to others?

Listeriosis is not spread from person to person. There is no need to avoid contact with infected people.

How can listeriosis be prevented?

Good sanitary practices are the best methods to prevent listeriosis and other foodborne illnesses. People at risk can prevent *Listeria* infection by avoiding certain high-risk foods and by handling food properly. The following are good general guidelines:

- Thoroughly cook raw food from animal sources, such as beef, pork, or poultry.
- Wash raw vegetables before eating.
- Keep uncooked meats separate from vegetables, cooked meats, and ready-to-eat foods.
- Avoid raw (unpasteurized) milk.
- Wash hands, knives, and cutting boards after handling uncooked foods.

In addition to the above, people at high risk, such as pregnant women and people with weak immune systems should take the following additional precautions:

- Do not eat hot dogs, luncheon meats, or deli meats unless they are reheated until steaming hot.
- Avoid getting fluid from hot dog packages on other foods, utensils, and food preparation surfaces.
- Do not eat soft cheeses such as feta, Brie, and Camembert, blue-veined cheeses, or Mexican-style cheeses, 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.
- Wash hands carefully after handling any potentially contaminated foods.

Where can I get more information?

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department
- NJ Department of Health www.nj.gov/health
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention www.cdc.gov/listeria

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional. Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.