

What is Listeriosis?

Listeriosis is an infection caused by the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*. *Listeria* is commonly found in soil, water, sewage and the intestinal tracts of animals. Listeriosis can be caused by contact with these sources or eating contaminated foods.

What are the symptoms?

Healthy people exposed to *Listeria* may not experience any symptoms or only mild symptoms. However, people in certain high risk groups may develop severe illness.

Symptoms of listeria may include fever, headache, tiredness, muscle aches and less commonly gastrointestinal illness. In more severe cases there may be inflammation of the brain (encephalitis) and the lining of the brain and spinal cord (meningitis) and/or blood poisoning (septicemia).

Pregnant women may experience only mild symptoms. However, listeriosis can lead to miscarriage, premature birth, stillbirth or infection of the newborn.

How is it spread?

Listeriosis most commonly results from eating contaminated food. It can also occur after contact with animals infected with *Listeria*. Person-to-person spread does not occur apart from mothers to babies during pregnancy or childbirth.

Who is at high risk?

Listeriosis is relatively uncommon. However, it can cause severe disease or death for high-risk individuals such as:

- Unborn babies
- Newborn babies
- Elderly people
- People with weakened immune systems

How can risk of infection be minimised?

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Taking a few simple precautions can help prevent listeriosis. For instance, you should:

- thoroughly cook raw meats such as beef, lamb, pork and chicken
- thoroughly wash raw fruit and vegetables before eating
- separate raw foods from cooked and ready-to-eat foods
- wash hands, knives and cutting boards before and after handling any raw foods and between handling different kinds of foods
- refrigerate perishable foods and eat them as soon as possible
- wash hands after handling animals.

Are there specific foods people at high risk should avoid?

Certain foods carry a higher risk for *Listeria* contamination. People at high risk should avoid eating:

- soft and semi-soft cheese (e.g. ricotta, brie)
- cold cooked chicken
- manufactured and cold meats
- soft serve ice-cream (including in milkshakes)
- cold, smoked and raw seafood
- prepared salads (e.g. from food courts, supermarkets)
- unpasteurised dairy products
- pâté
- ready-to-eat foods such as prepared sandwiches, sushi and bain-marie foods.

Incubation period

This can vary from 3 to 70 days, but the time from becoming infected to developing symptoms is usually about 3 weeks.

How is it diagnosed?

Listeriosis is generally diagnosed by having blood or spinal fluid tested for the bacteria.

How is it treated?

Treatment requires antibiotics and often hospitalisation.

Need more information?

For more information about listeriosis, contact your doctor or call the Health Protection Service, Communicable Disease Control Information Line during business hours on **(02) 6205 2155**.

Communicable Disease Control Section at Health Protection Service is responsible for the investigation and surveillance of notifiable or infectious conditions in the ACT in order to control or prevent their spread in the community. This includes the promotion of immunisation, education and other strategies that help to limit the spread of diseases.

Listeriosis is a notifiable disease. Cases notified to ACT Health are investigated by Public Health Officers.

Acknowledgements

1. Heymann DL, 2008, *Control of Communicable Diseases Manual*, 19th edition.
2. Food Standards Australia New Zealand, Listeria and Food Information sheet.
3. NSW Food Authority *Listeria monocytogenes* Fact Sheet, 2006.

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