

LISTERIOSIS



What is listeriosis?

Did you know you could get listeriosis from eating soft cheeses like feta or drinking raw milk? Listeriosis is an infection that results from eating food contaminated with the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*, or *Listeria* for short. *Listeria* is found in soil and water. Some animals such as cattle and poultry (like chickens and turkeys) can carry *Listeria* and can contaminate raw meats, processed meats like hot dogs, deli meats and dairy products. Listeriosis commonly affects older adults, pregnant women, newborns, and people with weakened immune systems. Most bacteria grow and multiply in warmer temperatures, but *Listeria* is one of the few bacteria that can live in cold temperatures.

How common is listeriosis?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that about 1,600 individuals get sick from *Listeria* in the U.S. each year. Of these, 260 result in death. In San Bernardino County, the total number of reported cases per year has been 5 or less since 2006. Although the incidence of listeriosis in San Bernardino County is low, food may be contaminated at any point along the food production chain before it is sold in local grocery stores and consumed by residents. Food may have been contaminated on farms, in food processing facilities, or during transportation and storage.

During one phase of a study conducted by researchers at Purdue University, 9.5 percent of samples taken from retail delis were contaminated with *Listeria*. Based on recent risk assessments, up to 83%

of listeriosis cases from deli meat in the United States are believed to be from ready-to-eat deli meats.

How do people get infected with this germ?

You can get listeriosis from eating food that has been contaminated with *Listeria*, such as raw fruits and vegetables or undercooked meats. The germ can also be found in food that has been contaminated after cooking or processing, such as ready-to-eat deli meats, processed meats like hot

dogs, refrigerated pâtés or meat spreads, and smoked seafood. Dairy products such as unpasteurized (raw) milk and soft cheeses made with unpasteurized milk, like queso fresco, brie, and feta are most likely to contain *Listeria*.

According to the CDC, anyone can get listeriosis, but 90% of those who get sick are in groups that are more likely to get *Listeria* infections. These groups include:

- **Pregnant women**—pregnant women are about 10 times more likely to get sick from *Listeria* than the general population.

- Pregnant Hispanic women are about 24 times more likely to get listeriosis than the general population.
- **Older adults**—adults who are 65 or older make up more than half (58%) of *Listeria* infections
- **People with weakened immune systems**—people with underlying medical conditions such as cancer, liver or kidney disease, diabetes, alcoholism and HIV/AIDS as well as people who are going through immunosuppressive therapy (i.e. chemotherapy, radiation, steroids) are also considered high-risk for listeriosis.

What can be done to prevent *Listeria* infections?

Pasteurization and cooking can kill *Listeria*. However, contamination may occur after factory cooking but before packaging in some ready-to-eat foods, such as hot dogs and deli meats. Since *Listeria* can grow and multiply in some foods at refrigerated temperatures, it is important to follow these tips to prevent listeriosis:

- Do not eat foods that have unpasteurized (raw) milk in them and do not drink unpasteurized milk.
- Thoroughly rinse raw produce under running water before eating.
- Keep raw meats, poultry, and seafood separate from vegetables, fruits, cooked foods, and ready-to-eat foods to prevent contamination.
- Make sure raw meat, poultry, and seafood are thoroughly cooked to a safe internal temperature.
- Wash hands, utensils, countertops, and cutting boards after handling and preparing uncooked foods.
- Consume perishable and ready-to-eat foods as soon as possible.

The CDC provides more specific recommendations for individuals who are at higher risk for listeriosis. Visit www.cdc.gov/listeria for more information.

How is listeriosis diagnosed?

Listeriosis can be diagnosed through a blood or spinal fluid test (to find the bacteria) if an individual is showing symptoms of a *Listeria* infection.

What are the symptoms of listeriosis?

Signs of possible *Listeria* infection include fever, chills, stiff neck, muscle aches, vomiting and sometimes diarrhea. In pregnant women, infection can cause preterm delivery, miscarriage, or fetal infection that may be life-threatening.

How is listeriosis treated?

Antibiotics are used to treat listeriosis. Individuals in the high-risk group (pregnant women and their newborns, older adults, and people with weakened immune systems) that experience fever, fatigue (extreme tiredness) and muscle aches within 2 months of eating contaminated food should seek immediate medical attention and tell the doctor about eating the contaminated food. If someone has eaten food that has been contaminated with *Listeria*, and does not show any signs of infection, no tests or treatments are needed, even if they are in the high-risk category for listeriosis.

Even with immediate treatment for listeriosis, there are cases that have resulted in death. This is most likely to occur among older adults and people with serious medical conditions.

For more information, please contact:
County of San Bernardino
Department of Public Health
Communicable Disease Section
dph.sbcounty.gov/programs/cds-2-2
(800) 722-4794

To report a possible foodborne illness, contact:
County of San Bernardino
Department of Public Health
Division of Environmental Health Services
(800) 442-2283

Source: this information was taken from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's website www.cdc.gov.