



Listeriosis

What is Listeriosis?

Listeriosis is a serious infection caused by eating food contaminated with the germ *Listeria monocytogenes*. This disease primarily occurs in pregnant women, newborns, persons with weakened immune systems, persons with cancer, diabetes or kidney disease, persons with AIDS and the elderly. People with healthy immune systems can become infected with *Listeria*, but rarely become seriously ill.

How is it spread?

Listeria monocytogenes contaminates foods of animal origin, such as meats and dairy products. Vegetables can become contaminated from the soil when manure (animal waste) is used as fertilizer. The germ can be found in uncooked meats and vegetables and in processed foods that become contaminated after processing, such as soft cheeses and cold cuts. Unpasteurized milk or foods made from unpasteurized milk may contain the germ as well.

Listeria monocytogenes is killed by pasteurization and cooking; however some ready-to-eat foods such as hot dogs and deli meats may be contaminated before packaging.

What are the symptoms?

A person with listeriosis may have fever, muscle aches, nausea or diarrhea. If the infection spreads to the nervous system, symptoms such as headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance or convulsions may occur.

Infected pregnant women may experience mild, flu-like symptoms; however, infections during pregnancy can lead to miscarriage or stillbirth and premature delivery or infection of the newborn.

How is it diagnosed?

Listeriosis can be diagnosed using blood or spinal fluid test cultures.

How is it treated?

Antibiotics can be given. That will kill the bacteria. Even with prompt treatment, some infections result in death. This is very likely in the elderly and other persons with serious medical conditions.

How is it prevented?

Prevention of listeriosis follows the recommendations of general food safety:

- Thoroughly cook raw food from animal sources, such as beef, pork or poultry.
- Thoroughly wash raw vegetables with drinkable, running water before eating.
- Keep uncooked meats separate from cooked or ready-to-eat foods.
- Avoid unpasteurized milk or foods made from unpasteurized milk.
- Wash hands, utensils and cutting boards after handling uncooked foods.
- Consume perishable and ready-to-eat foods before the expiration date on package.

Additional recommendations for person at high risk, such as pregnant women and persons with weakened immune systems:

- 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. Wash hands after handling hot dogs or luncheon and deli meats.
- Do not eat soft cheeses such as feta, Brie, Camembert and blue-veined cheeses or Mexican-style cheeses such as queso blanco, queso fresco and Panela, unless clearly labeled that 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. Canned or shelf-stable smoked seafood may be eaten.

How does it affect my family?

Family members who prepare food should follow general food safety guidelines to avoid listeriosis as well as other food-borne illnesses. Special care should be taken in food purchase or preparation for pregnant women, persons with weakened immune systems, persons with cancer, diabetes, kidney disease, persons with AIDS or HIV and elderly persons.

For more information call the Guilford County Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Division at (336) 641-7777 or visit our website at www.myguilford.com or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov