

What is listeriosis?

Listeriosis is a bacterial infection caused by *Listeria monocytogenes*. This bacteria occurs widely in the environment, where it is found in soil, water, and decaying vegetation. Many animals, including cattle, sheep, and poultry, have been found to carry the bacteria with or without symptoms. Because *L. monocytogenes* is so common in the environment, and severe human disease is so rare, it is believed that most human infections produce few or no symptoms. When people do fall ill, meningoenkephalitis (swelling of the brain and its covering membranes) and infection of the blood are two of the most serious forms the disease can take. In addition, pregnant women may have stillbirths if infected with the organism, and babies born alive to infected mothers have a fatality rate of up to 50%.

What are the symptoms of listeriosis?

Symptoms include severe headache, fever, muscle aches, sometimes diarrhea and nausea, and signs of meningitis (fatigue, stiff neck, confusion).

Who is at greatest risk of developing listeriosis?

While pregnant women may have only mild symptoms themselves, they are at particular risk of transferring infection to the fetus. Infected infants may be born with a blood infection (septicemia) or develop meningitis after they are born. Others at greater risk for developing disease are seniors, immunocompromised people (those persons infected with HIV, or taking cancer treatments, for example), and persons with chronic diseases such as cirrhosis of the liver, diabetes, or ulcerative colitis. Healthy adults and children rarely become seriously ill from listeriosis.

How does someone get listeriosis?

Most cases of listeriosis result from eating contaminated food products. Outbreaks of listeriosis have been linked to drinking raw or contaminated milk, soft cheeses, contaminated vegetables, and ready-to-eat meats. Unlike most other bacteria, *Listeria* multiplies at refrigerator temperatures, and is sometimes called the “refrigerator bacteria.” Because of the special risk for severe infection, pregnant women are advised to avoid ready-to-eat deli type meats or cold cuts, unpasteurized milk and cheese, and other foods that cannot be adequately cleaned or heated before eating.

If exposed to *Listeria*, how long would it take before symptoms appear?

The average time period between exposure and symptoms is thought to be three weeks, but illness can develop any time between three and 70 days.

Is there any treatment for listeriosis?

Yes. Listeriosis is treated with antibiotics prescribed by a physician. When infection occurs during pregnancy, antibiotics given to the pregnant woman can be effective in preventing infection of the fetus or newborn.

What can be done to prevent listeriosis?

- Thoroughly cook raw food from animal sources such as beef, pork, and poultry.
- Do not drink raw (unpasteurized) milk or foods made from raw milk.
- Persons in high-risk groups should not eat soft cheeses made from unpasteurized milk or smoked fish.
- Ready-to-eat foods such as hot dogs, deli meats, and luncheon meats should be cooked until steaming hot before eating.

- Store uncooked meats separate from vegetables, cooked foods, and ready-to-eat foods.
- Thoroughly wash raw vegetables before eating.
- After handling raw foods, wash your hands with warm soapy water, and wash used utensils with hot soapy water before using them again.
- Follow label instructions on products that must be refrigerated or that are labeled with a “use by” date.
- Wash your hands thoroughly after contact with animals, and after working in the garden.
- Do not use untreated manure on vegetable crops.
- Veterinarians and farmers should take proper precautions in handling aborted fetuses and sick or dead animals, especially sheep that have apparently died of encephalitis.

