

# Understanding and Preventing: Listeria



## What is listeriosis?

Listeriosis, a serious infection usually caused by eating food contaminated with the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*, is an important public health problem in the United States. The disease primarily affects older adults, pregnant women, newborns and adults with weakened immune systems. However, rarely, people without these risk factors can also be affected. The risk may be reduced by following a few simple recommendations.

## How does someone get listeriosis?

People get listeriosis by eating food contaminated with *Listeria monocytogenes*. Babies can be born with listeriosis if their mothers eat contaminated food during pregnancy. However, healthy people may consume contaminated foods without becoming ill. People at risk can prevent listeriosis by avoiding certain higher-risk foods and by handling and storing food properly.

*Listeria monocytogenes* is commonly found in soil and water. Animals can carry the bacterium without appearing ill and can contaminate foods of animal origin, such as meats and dairy products.

## Transmission

Vital Signs Graphic: *Listeria* hides in many foods. Most human infections follow consumption of contaminated food. Rare cases of hospital-acquired transmission have been reported in newborns. When *Listeria* bacteria get into a food processing factory, they can live there for years, sometimes contaminating food products. The bacterium has been found in a variety of foods, such as:

- Uncooked meats and vegetables
- Unpasteurized (raw) milk and cheeses as well as other foods made from unpasteurized milk
- Cooked or processed foods, including certain soft cheeses, processed (or ready-to-eat) meats and smoked seafood

*Listeria* are killed by cooking and pasteurization. However, in some ready-to-eat meats, such as hot dogs and deli meats, contamination may occur after factory cooking but before packaging or even at the deli counter. Also, be aware that Mexican-style cheeses (such as queso fresco) made from pasteurized milk and likely contaminated during cheese-making have caused *Listeria* infections. Unlike most bacteria, *Listeria* can grow and multiply in some foods in the refrigerator.

## What are the symptoms of listeriosis?

A person with listeriosis usually has fever and muscle aches, sometimes preceded by diarrhea or other gastrointestinal symptoms. Almost everyone who is diagnosed with listeriosis has “invasive” infection, in which the bacteria spread beyond the gastrointestinal tract. The symptoms vary with the infected person:

- Pregnant women: Pregnant women typically experience fever and other non-specific symptoms, such as fatigue and aches. However, infections during pregnancy can lead to miscarriage, stillbirth, premature delivery or life-threatening infection of the newborn.
- People other than pregnant women: Symptoms can include headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance, and convulsions in addition to fever and muscle aches. Listeriosis can present in different ways.
- In older adults and people with immunocompromising conditions, septicemia and meningitis are the most common clinical presentations.

## How is listeriosis treated?

Listeriosis is treated with antibiotics. A person in a higher-risk category (pregnant woman, older adults and people with weakened immune systems) who experiences fever and other non-specific symptoms, such as fatigue and aches, within 2 months of eating contaminated food should seek medical care and tell the physician or healthcare provider about eating the contaminated food. If a person has eaten food contaminated with *Listeria* and does not have any symptoms, most experts believe that no tests or treatment are needed, even for persons at higher risk for listeriosis.

## Tips For Preventing Listeria: Clean | Separate | Cook | Chill



### Clean

Wash hands, utensils and counters with soapy water.



### Separate

Don't cross-contaminate, keep raw meat, fish and poultry away from other food that won't be cooked.



### Cook

Use a thermometer to cook food to a safe internal temperature.



### Chill

Refrigerate cooked food within 2 hours.

## Did you know?

Listeria can grow in your refrigerator and freezer!

Keep your refrigerator set to 40° or below and your freezer set to 0° or below.

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