

Listeriosis

Description:

*Listeriosis is a relatively uncommon disease caused by the bacteria *Listeria monocytogenes*. *Listeria* is widespread in nature and is commonly found in soil, water, mud, vegetation and sewerage. It can also be found in raw meat, raw vegetables and unpasteurised dairy products. Some exposure to these bacteria is unavoidable. Every day, most healthy people eat foods that contain small amounts of *Listeria* with no apparent ill effects.*

Listeriosis is of particular concern to pregnant women and people with a weakened immune system, such as diabetics, cancer and transplant patients, people who are HIV positive, and people with a history of alcohol abuse, as these people are at increased risk of contracting the disease.

*Although the infection may cause minor or no symptoms in healthy people, including pregnant women, the risk of infection from a pregnant woman to her unborn child is high. Infection of the foetus usually occurs about three days after the mother is infected, and may lead to miscarriage, stillbirth, premature birth or a very ill newborn. The death rate in foetuses and newborn babies affected by *Listeria* has ranged from 30 to 50%.*

Symptoms:

Healthy people may show few or no symptoms. If symptoms are present, they may vary from minor complaints such as fever, headache, aches and pains, vomiting and diarrhoea to more serious forms of the illness such as meningitis (infection of the brain) and septicaemia (blood poisoning).

Transmission

Listeriosis is mainly spread by eating contaminated food. People infected with listeria may spread the bacteria in their faeces for several months. The bacteria can also be transmitted from a pregnant mother via the placenta to an unborn baby or to the baby at the time of birth. Mothers of infected newborns may pass on the bacteria in vaginal discharges and urine for seven to ten days.

Listeria can also cause miscarriage in domestic and farm animals, therefore contact with aborted animal foetuses and the parent animal could transmit the bacteria to humans. Infections caused by breathing in the bacteria or by direct inoculation of the skin and eyes have been described.

The time from exposure to developing of the disease in susceptible individuals is about three weeks.

Treatment:

Listeria can be successfully treated with antibiotics if treatment is commenced early, however newborn infants have a high mortality rate despite antibiotic treatment.

Prevention:

Pregnant women and other susceptible persons are advised to avoid high-risk foods and should also avoid contact with potentially infected materials, eg. aborted animal foetuses on farms and untreated manures.

What are the high-risk foods?

High risk foods are usually chilled ready-to-eat foods including:

- pate, uncooked smoked seafood, soft cheeses (eg. brie, camembert, ricotta)
- cooked diced chicken (as used in chicken sandwiches)
- cold meat products (eg. cold roast meat, processed meats)
- pre-prepared and stored salads, raw seafood (eg. oysters) and
- unpasteurised dairy products.

What foods are safe?

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All freshly cooked foods, hard cheeses, fresh pasteurised milk and milk products, UHT milk, yoghurt, fresh washed vegetables and fruit, and all canned foods are usually considered safe.

How can food be prepared safely?

- Refrigeration does NOT stop the growth of listeria. High-risk foods that have been prepared and then stored in a refrigerator for more than twelve hours should not be eaten by people in the high-risk groups.
- Freshly cooked foods are safest. Conventional cooking destroys listeria.
- Hot food should be thoroughly cooked and kept hot above 60 degrees C.
- Raw vegetables should be thoroughly washed before eating.
- Uncooked meats should be kept covered and separate from cooked foods and ready-to-eat food to avoid cross-contamination.

Knives and cutting boards used to prepare uncooked foods should not be used to prepare cooked or ready-to-eat foods unless thoroughly washed first.

Help and Assistance

For further information, please contact your local doctor, community health centre or nearest public health unit.

Footnotes

Heymann, D., ed. 2004. *Control of Communicable Diseases Manual*, 18th edition. Washington, DC: American Public Health Association.