

URGENT PUBLIC HEALTH ALERT (all GP Divisions)

Queensland Health is alerting General Practitioners to an increased number of notifications of listeriosis this year in both Queensland and Australia. There have been 56 notifications in Australia in the first half of 2009, which is about the number usually expected in an entire year.

Queensland Health in collaboration with national and other state and territory public health and food safety authorities are also investigating a possible association with chicken wraps distributed to companies in South East Queensland including Virgin Blue up to the end of June 2009. The likely source of the contamination was an ingredient supplied to the manufacturer of the wraps, and not those companies which received the wraps. The wraps with contaminated ingredients were withdrawn from the market at the end of June. However further cases are possible as the incubation period for listeriosis can be up to 70 days.

While healthy individuals with listeriosis may often have relatively minor symptoms e.g. fever, headache, myalgias, vomiting and diarrhoea, certain groups are at risk of more serious illness e.g. meningoencephalitis and septicaemia. Pregnant women are particularly at risk from listeriosis, with potential complications being stillbirth, spontaneous abortion and neonatal death. While prevention is the principal goal, early diagnosis and treatment of infected women can also be of significant benefit.

I encourage you to advise people at risk of serious illness of appropriate precautions e.g. avoiding foods at risk of contamination with *Listeria* and good food preparation, storage and handling practices.

Groups at higher risk include:

- pregnant women (and their unborn/newborn children)
- people aged 65 years and over
- immunosuppressed, including people with cancer or chronic diseases such as diabetes, liver or kidney disease

High risk foods include:

- pate, uncooked smoked seafood, soft cheeses
- 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.

Additional information about listeriosis can be found on the Queensland Health website at http://access.health.qld.gov.au/hid/InfectionsandParasites/BacterialInfections/listeriosis_fs.pdf or on the Food Standards Australia and New Zealand website at <http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/srcfiles/Listeria.pdf>

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