

# What is Listeriosis?

**Listeriosis** is a serious infection caused by eating food contaminated with the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*. It affects primarily pregnant women (one-third of cases), newborns, and adults with weakened immune systems. Healthy adults and children occasionally get listeriosis but rarely become seriously ill.

## What are the symptoms of listeriosis?

Fever, muscle aches, and sometimes gastrointestinal symptoms (e.g. nausea and diarrhoea). If infection spreads to the nervous system, headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance, or convulsions may occur. Pregnant women may experience only a mild 'flu-like illness but the condition may lead to premature delivery, infection of the newborn, or even stillbirth.

## How does Listeria get into food?

The bacterium is found in soil and water, so vegetables and animals can become contaminated. The bacterium has been found in a variety of raw foods, such as uncooked meats and vegetables, as well as soft cheeses, cold cuts of meat, unpasteurised (raw) milk and its products. The heating used to prepare ready-to-eat processed meats should be sufficient to kill it. Healthy people may consume contaminated foods without becoming ill. Those at risk can prevent Listeria infection by avoiding high-risk foods and by handling food properly.

## What are the high-risk foods?

Chilled ready-to-eat foods including paté, uncooked smoked seafood, soft cheeses, cooked diced chicken, cold meat products, pre-prepared and stored salads, raw seafood, and unpasteurised dairy products.

## How soon do symptoms develop after infection?

Approximately 3 weeks (with a range of 3–70 days). Infection of an unborn baby occurs about 3 days after the mother is infected.

## For how long is it infectious?

The bacteria may be shed in the faeces for several months.

## 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 cooked thoroughly and kept above 60°C.
- Raw vegetables should be thoroughly washed before eating.
- Uncooked meats should be kept covered and separate from cooked 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.

## How do you know if you have listeriosis?

Listeriosis is diagnosed by culture of blood or spinal fluid in infected individuals. The risk of Listeria infection after consumption of a contaminated product is very small, with about 10 to 20 cases reported in Queensland annually.

## Can listeriosis be treated?

Yes, with antibiotics especially if treatment is commenced early, however newborn infants have a high mortality rate despite antibiotic treatment. Among the elderly and those with serious medical problems some infections result in death, even with swift treatment.