

Listeriosis - Factsheet

What is listeriosis?

Listeriosis is a disease caused by eating food “dirtied” or contaminated with the *Listeria monocytogenes* bacteria.

What are the symptoms of listeriosis?

Symptoms usually occur about 1 to 14 days after exposure but may be longer in cases of infected pregnant women, up to 70 days after exposure. The disease may be mild or severe.

- Mild symptoms include fever and muscle aches and sometimes nausea or diarrhea. Healthy children and adults may not have any symptoms.
- Severe symptoms include sudden fever, intense headache, stiff neck and confusion, loss of balance and convulsions. These may occur when the infection spreads to the nervous system or bloodstream. This is more likely to happen in newborns and adults with weak immune systems (e.g., persons with cancer, diabetes, or an organ transplant).
- If a woman is infected while pregnant, she may not feel very ill, but may have a premature delivery or even lose the baby as a result of infection. A baby can also become infected during the last trimester of pregnancy or during birth, and then become sick in the first three weeks of life.

How is listeriosis spread?

Eating or consuming raw or contaminated milk, soft cheeses, unwashed raw vegetables, undercooked poultry and ready-to-eat meats (like cold cuts) can cause infection. Listeriosis may also be spread from a pregnant woman to her baby in the womb or during birth.

How long are people contagious?

Infected humans can shed the bacteria in stool for several months. Mothers of infected newborn infants may shed the bacteria in vaginal discharges and urine for 7 to 10 days after delivery. This disease is not very contagious since the bacteria are not easily passed from one person to another.

Who gets listeriosis?

Anyone can get listeriosis, but there are certain groups of people more likely to get sick.

- Unborn babies and newborns.
- Pregnant women.
- People who have weak immune systems.
- Elderly persons.

What treatment is available for people with listeriosis?

Ampicillin and gentamicin are used to treat listeriosis. Antibiotics may be given to infected pregnant women to prevent illness in the baby.

Do infected people need to be kept home from school, work or daycare?

Since the bacteria are passed in stool, people with diarrhea should be excluded from day care, patient care, and food handling. Most infected people may return to work or school when their diarrhea stops, provided that they carefully wash their hands after using the toilet and before preparing and/or eating food.

How can I protect myself and my family from getting listeriosis?

- Pregnant women and persons with weak immune systems persons should *not* eat soft cheeses such as feta, Brie or “queso fresco”.
- Avoid raw milk and other unpasteurized dairy products.
- Wash hands frequently with water and soap. (Sanitizing gel may be substituted when hands are not visibly soiled.)
- Immediately wash cutting boards and counters used for preparation to prevent cross contamination with other foods.
- Ensure that the correct internal cooking temperature is reached particularly when cooking using a microwave.