Listeriosis - Factsheet

What is listeriosis?

Listeriosis is a disease caused by eating foods contaminated with the *Listeria monocytogene*s bacteria.

What are the symptoms of listeriosis?

Symptoms usually occur about 1–14 days after exposure but may be longer for 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 can also be asymptomatic.
- Severe symptoms include sudden fever, intense headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance, and convulsions.; these may occur when the infection spreads to the nervous system or bloodstream. Newborns and adults with weak immune systems (e.g., people with cancer, diabetes, or an organ transplant) are at higher risk of experiencing severe symptoms if ill.
- Pregnant infected people may not feel symptomatic but remain at high risk for premature delivery or miscarriage/stillbirth. Newborn infants may become infected during the last trimester of pregnancy or during birth, resulting in illness during 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 to a baby in the womb or during birth.

How long are people contagious?

Human-to-human transmission is rare, other than during pregnancy. Mothers of infected newborn infants may shed the bacteria in vaginal discharges and urine for 7–10 days after delivery. This disease is not very contagious since the bacteria are not easily passed from person-to-person.

Who gets listeriosis?

Anyone can get listeriosis, but the following groups of people are at higher risk for infection:

- Unborn babies and newborns
- Pregnant people
- Immunocompromised people
- Elderly people

What treatment is available for people with listeriosis?

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

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

- Pregnant and immunocompromised 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 food preparation to prevent cross contamination.
- Ensure that the optimal internal cooking temperature is reached, particularly when cooking using a microwave.