



# Listeriosis Fact Sheet

## What is listeriosis?

Listeriosis is an illness caused by the bacteria *Listeria monocytogenes*. Cases generally occur sporadically throughout the year. It is the third leading cause of death from foodborne illness, or food poisoning, in the United States. An estimated 1,600 people get sick from *Listeria* each year, and about 260 die.

## Who gets listeriosis?

Anyone can get listeriosis. Those most at risk for developing severe disease symptoms are newborn infants, the elderly, pregnant women, and persons having a suppressed immune system due to an underlying condition (cancer, liver or kidney disease, diabetes). More than half of all *Listeria* infections occur in people 65 and older. Children and adults to age 40 are generally resistant to the bacteria. After age 40, resistance gradually decreases.

## What are the symptoms of listeriosis?

Most people who become infected with *Listeria* will have no symptoms of illness and remain healthy. Some people may notice a mild flu-like illness with fever.

Persons identified above as most at risk may develop severe disease. Symptoms may include sudden onset of fever, intense headache, nausea, vomiting and signs of meningitis (headache, stiff neck, and fever).

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There is special concern for listeriosis in pregnant women because they can transfer the bacteria to the fetus. Spontaneous abortion may occur as a result. Additionally, infants may be stillborn, born with a blood infection (septicemia), or develop meningitis after they are born, even though the mother has no apparent symptoms of the disease.

### **How do you get listeriosis?**

Listeria is commonly found in soil, vegetation, water and mud. Listeria also infects domestic and wild animals, livestock and fowl. Most cases of listeriosis result from eating contaminated food products. Listeria can grow at refrigeration temperatures; however, it grows slower at temperatures at 40°F or less. Listeria can also grow on soft cheeses during their ripening period. Outbreaks of listeriosis have been linked to drinking raw or contaminated milk, soft cheeses, contaminated vegetables, and ready-to-eat meats.

### **How long would it take for me to become ill if I were exposed to Listeria?**

People with invasive listeriosis usually report symptoms 1 to 4 weeks after eating contaminated food; some people have reported symptoms as late as 70 days after exposure or as early as the same day of exposure.

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## What should I do if I become ill?

Persons who are ill should see their health care provider. Stool cultures are not recommended, but your physician may culture your blood to determine if you have listeriosis. Treatments may differ for pregnant women, older adults, or people with weakened immunity. Specific treatment consists of antibiotics. Together with antibiotics your health care provider may prescribe penicillin, ampicillin, or a combination of the two.

## How can I protect myself from Listeria infection?

- Pregnant women, immunocompromised persons, the chronically ill and the elderly:
  - Eat only thoroughly cooked meats and seafood. These persons may choose to avoid or to thoroughly cook summer sausage, hot dogs and luncheon or deli meats.
  - Avoid eating soft cheeses such as feta, Brie, Camembert, blue-veined, and Mexican-style cheese. They should also only consume pasteurized dairy products. Hard cheeses, processed cheeses, cream cheese, cottage cheese, or yogurt need not be avoided.
- Wash your hands thoroughly after handling raw meat, contact with animals and gardening.
- Avoid using untreated manure on vegetable crops.

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- Thoroughly wash raw vegetables before eating
- Veterinarians and farmers should take proper precautions in handling aborted fetuses and sick or dead animals, especially cattle, goats or sheep that have apparently died of encephalitis. Such contact may lead to a localized skin infection or severe disease.

*For further information, contact the  
Oklahoma City-County Health Department  
(405) 425-4437*

Revised 08/2019

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