

LISTERIOSIS

What is *Listeria*?

***Listeria* is a bacterium that is widespread in nature and is commonly found in soil, vegetation, water, sewage and the feces of animals and humans. *Listeria* can cause listeriosis, a serious but rare illness that, in certain cases, can lead to brain infection and even death.**

The elderly, newborns, pregnant women and those who have a weakened immune system are most susceptible to developing listeriosis.

What are the symptoms of listeriosis?

Symptoms may start suddenly and include:

- Vomiting
- Nausea
- Cramps
- Diarrhea
- Severe headache
- Constipation
- Fever

Some infections become severe and develop into an infection of the brain or the lining of the brain (Meningitis) and blood poisoning (Bacteremia). Some people experience only mild flu-like symptoms. In newborn babies, symptoms may include loss of appetite, lethargy, jaundice, vomiting, skin rash and difficulty breathing. Infection during pregnancy may result in fetal loss through miscarriage or stillbirth, neonatal meningitis or septicemia. Pregnant women may experience mild symptoms such as, fever, headache, myalgia and gastrointestinal symptoms.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms can occur from three to 70 days after eating foods contaminated with *Listeria*, with an average incubation period of three weeks. It likely varies depending on the concentration of *Listeria* in the food.

What causes listeriosis?

Listeriosis is caused by eating food contaminated with *Listeria* bacteria. *Listeria* can be found in unpasteurized (raw) dairy products, raw vegetables and uncooked meats. Foods such as hot dogs, cold cuts or deli meats can also be contaminated after processing. Foods that are contaminated with *Listeria* have a normal look, smell and taste. Unlike most other harmful bacteria, *Listeria* will grow on foods stored in a refrigerator *and* can be killed by proper cooking procedures.

Listeria bacteria are not commonly passed from person to person.

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How can listeriosis be prevented?

- Thoroughly cook raw meats such as beef, lamb, pork or poultry
- Keep foods out of the temperature danger zone (between 4°C and 60°C or 40°F and 140°F). Keep the refrigerator at 4°C (40°F) or colder. Refrigerate foods promptly
- Wash raw vegetables and fruit before eating
- Avoid unpasteurized (raw) milk or foods made from unpasteurized (raw) milk
- Keep raw meat separate from vegetables, cooked foods and ready-to-eat foods
- Use separate cutting boards for raw meat and foods that are ready to eat
- Wash your hands with soap and water using correct [handwashing procedures](#) before and after preparing food and after handling animals
- Clean all utensils, cutting boards and work surfaces with mild bleach solution
- Follow “best before” or expiry dates on food items
- If possible, buy only as much product as will be consumed in one or two days

How is listeriosis treated?

Listeriosis is treated with antibiotics. Depending on the form of the disease, treatment may take up to six weeks or more. Antibiotics given to pregnant women with listeriosis can often reduce the risk of infection in the newborn or the unborn child. There is no vaccine to prevent listeriosis.

What should I do if I have food recalled because of *Listeria* contamination?

Throw out food that has been recalled because of *Listeria* contamination. Visit the [Canadian Food Inspection Agency](#) (CFIA) for the most current list of food recalls.

What should I do if I have eaten food that has been recalled because of *Listeria* contamination?

If you have eaten a contaminated product and do not have any symptoms, no tests are required. However, if you become ill with fever or serious illness, contact your health care provider and mention your possible exposure.