

LISTERIOSIS

What is listeriosis?

Listeriosis is a serious but uncommon bacterial infection that primarily affects certain high risk populations such as pregnant women, newborns, and adults with weakened immune systems.

What are the symptoms of listeriosis?

Most healthy children and adults have either an asymptomatic infection or a mild flu-like illness, including fever, muscle aches, malaise, vomiting and diarrhea. If the infection spreads to the nervous system, symptoms such as headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance, or convulsions can occur.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The incubation period (time between exposure and beginning of symptoms) is variable. Symptoms may appear from 3-70 days after exposure, with an average of 3 weeks.

How is listeriosis spread?

The infection is usually spread by eating contaminated food. Babies can be born with listeriosis if their mothers ate contaminated food during pregnancy. The most common foods contaminated with listeria include those that are ready-to-eat, such as deli meats and hot dogs, as well as unpasteurized milk and milk products (homemade and soft cheeses).

How is listeriosis diagnosed and treated?

Listeria is diagnosed by culture, usually of the blood, spinal fluid, placenta, or amniotic fluid. Intravenous antibiotics are used to treat listeriosis.

Can listeriosis cause serious problems?

If a pregnant woman develops listeriosis, it can have serious consequences to the unborn baby.

While pregnant women may experience only a mild, flu-like illness, listeria infections during pregnancy can lead to miscarriage or stillbirth, premature delivery, or serious, life-threatening infections in the newborn. About 30 – 50% of infected newborns die of listeriosis.

How can I prevent a listeriosis infection?

1. Thoroughly cook all raw animal products, including beef, pork, and poultry.
2. Wash raw vegetables thoroughly before eating.
3. Keep uncooked meats separate from vegetables, cooked foods and ready-to-eat foods.
4. Avoid unpasteurized (raw) milk or foods made from unpasteurized milk.
5. Wash hands, knives, and cutting boards after handling uncooked foods.
6. Consume perishable and ready-to-eat foods as soon as possible.

-more-

Recommendations for persons at high risk, such as pregnant women and persons with weakened immune systems, in addition to the recommendations listed above:

1. Wash hands thoroughly after handling all meats.
2. Do not eat hot dogs, luncheon meats, or deli meats, unless they are reheated until steaming hot.
3. Avoid getting fluid from hot dog packages on other foods, utensils, and food preparation surfaces.
4. Do not eat soft cheeses such as feta, Brie, blue-veined cheeses, or Mexican-style cheeses such as queso blanco or queso fresco, unless they have labels that clearly state they are made from pasteurized milk.
5. Do not eat refrigerated pâtés or meat spreads. Canned pâtés and meat spreads may be eaten.
6. Do not eat refrigerated smoked seafood, unless it is contained in a cooked dish. Refrigerated smoked seafood is most often labeled as "nova-style," "lox," "kippered," "smoked," or "jerky". Canned or shelf-stable smoked seafood may be eaten.

What should I do if I've eaten a food recalled because of listeria contamination?

The risk of someone developing listeriosis after eating a contaminated product is very small. If you have eaten a contaminated product and do not have any symptoms, we do not recommend that you have any tests or treatment, even if you are in a high-risk group. However, if you are in a high-risk group, have eaten the contaminated product, and within 2 months become ill with fever or signs of serious illness, you should contact your physician and inform him or her about this exposure.

Listeriosis is a Washington State reportable disease and must be reported to your local health department. In Snohomish County, contact Communicable Disease Surveillance and Response at 425.339.5278, Monday-Friday, 8:00 AM- 5:00PM.

Listeriosis_factsheet_rev_01012011hb