



## **WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT LISTERIOSIS**

Listeria is a bacterium that is naturally found in the environment. It commonly occurs in soil, water, vegetation and in the faeces of some animals.

Listeria monocytogenes is a facultative anaerobic bacterium, capable of surviving in the presence or absence of oxygen.

It has the ability to grow at temperatures as low as 0°C thereby permits multiplication at typical refrigeration temperatures.

Listeria monocytogenes has been associated with such foods as raw milk, pasteurized fluid milk, cheeses (particularly soft-ripened varieties), ice cream, raw vegetables, fermented raw-meat sausages, raw and cooked poultry, raw meats (of all types), and raw and smoked fish. This fact, coupled with a variable incubation period that can range from 6 hours to 70 days

Listeria monocytogenes is typically a food-borne organism which causes listeriosis and can grow and reproduce inside the host cell. Although Listeriosis is an uncommon cause of illness in the general population it is an important pathogen in pregnant patients, neonates, elderly individuals, and other immunocompromised individuals. Patients with cancer, particularly those of blood, are also at high risk for listeriosis.

It can be isolated from soil, water, and decaying vegetation. The most common clinical manifestation is diarrhea. A mild presentation of fever, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea may resemble a gastrointestinal illness.

The microorganism has gained recognition because of its association with epidemic gastroenteritis. Bacteremia and meningitis are also more serious manifestations of disease that can affect individuals at high risk of Listeriosis. Unless recognized and treated, Listeria infections can result in significant morbidity and mortality.

From January to December 2017 South Africa recorded about 603 cases of listeriosis, 219 of the affected were neonates, with over 50 persons aged above 65yrs and the rest identified to be pregnant or HIV infected. 40 of the infected persons have so far been confirmed dead.



## **What are the symptoms of listeriosis?**

Listeriosis can cause a variety of symptoms, depending on the person and the part of the body affected. Listeria can cause fever and diarrhea similar to other foodborne germs, but this type of Listeria infection is rarely diagnosed. Symptoms in people with invasive listeriosis, meaning the bacteria has spread beyond the gut, depend on whether the person is pregnant.

Pregnant women typically experience only fever and other flu-like symptoms, such as fatigue and muscle aches. However, infections during pregnancy can lead to miscarriage, stillbirth, premature delivery, or life-threatening infection of the newborn.

People other than pregnant women: Symptoms can include headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance, and convulsions in addition to fever and muscle aches.

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

## **How is listeriosis diagnosed and treated?**

Listeriosis is usually diagnosed when a bacterial culture (a type of laboratory test) grows *Listeria monocytogenes* from a body tissue or fluid, such as blood, spinal fluid, or the placenta. Listeriosis is treated with antibiotics.

## **How do people get infected with Listeria?**

Listeriosis is usually caused by eating food contaminated with *Listeria monocytogenes*. If infection occurs during pregnancy, Listeria bacteria can spread to the baby through the placenta.

## **What should I do if I suspect that I've eaten food that may have been contaminated with Listeria?**

You should seek medical care and tell the doctor about eating possibly contaminated food if you have a fever and other symptoms of possible listeriosis, such as fatigue and muscle aches, within two months after eating possibly contaminated food. This is especially important if you are pregnant, age 65 or older, or have a weakened immune system. If you ate food possibly contaminated with Listeria and do not feel sick, most experts believe you do not need tests or treatment. Talk with your medical provider if you have questions about what to do after eating possibly contaminated food.



## **Is listeriosis a serious disease?**

Most people with invasive listeriosis require hospital care, and about one in five people with the infection die. When listeriosis occurs during pregnancy, it can cause miscarriage, stillbirth, or newborn death. Listeriosis during pregnancy results in fetal loss in about 20% and newborn death in about 3% of cases.

- Listeria cannot be spread from person to person.
- Listeria infection follows consumption of contaminated food, or is transmitted from a pregnant mother to her unborn foetus.
- Most healthy people who consume food contaminated with Listeria do not get ill. When persons do get ill, they develop either self-limiting gastroenteritis that presents with fever and diarrhea, which usually resolves on its own without medical intervention, or more severe illness including meningitis, bacteria in the blood, and pregnancy-associated complications.

## **Some simple food safety practices that can prevent listeriosis**

Everyone needs to know the risks of food poisoning and follow **the Clean, Separate, Cook, Chill** guidelines;

- Know which foods are risky and avoid these foods
- Thoroughly cook raw food from animal sources, such as meat, poultry, or seafood to a safe internal temperature.
- Avoid drinking raw (unpasteurized) milk or eating soft cheeses made from it
- Heat deli meats and hot dogs until steaming hot before eating.
- Refrigerate leftovers within 2 hours in shallow, covered containers and use within 3-4 days.
- Avoid cross-contamination in the refrigerator or other places in the kitchen by frequently washing hands, knives, countertops, and cutting boards after handling and preparing uncooked foods.
- Rinse raw produce thoroughly under running tap water before eating.
- Use a thermometer to make sure your refrigerator is 4°C or lower and your freezer is -18°C or lower.
- Keep uncooked meats, poultry, and seafood separate from vegetables, fruits, cooked foods, and ready-to-eat foods.
- Consume perishable and ready-to-eat foods as soon as possible.

**ALWAYS REMEMBER, YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT, AND SO LET'S MAKE FOOD SAFETY OUR LIFESTYLE AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY.**