



## Listeriosis

### What is Listeriosis?

Listeriosis is a serious, foodborne illness caused by the ingestion of food contaminated by the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*. The disease affects primarily the elderly, pregnant women and those with weakened immune systems. In serious cases, it can lead to brain infection and even death. *Listeria monocytogenes* is a gram positive bacillus that is widely found in the environment, particularly in soil and in human and animal feces. *Listeria* can also be normal intestinal flora in healthy humans and animals.

### What are the Symptoms?

Symptoms can include flu-like symptoms, fever, muscle aches, headache, nausea and vomiting, diarrhea and stomach cramps. If infection spreads to the nervous system, invasive illness such as meningitis, characterized by severe headache and neck stiffness, or septicemia, blood poisoning, can occur. Infected pregnant women may experience only a mild flu-like illness; however infections during pregnancy can lead to premature delivery, and infection of the newborn or even stillbirth.

The mild form of illness usually begins within 1 to 3 days after eating the contaminated food. The incubation period for more serious forms of the disease is generally much longer- up to 90 days.

### How do you get Listeriosis?

You get Listeriosis by eating food (especially milk, soft cheeses, vegetables and ready-to-eat meats) contaminated with *Listeria*. Healthy people may eat contaminated food without becoming ill but those at increased risk can become ill after eating food contaminated with even a few bacteria. The bacterium has been found in a variety of raw foods such as uncooked meats and vegetables, as well as in processed foods that become contaminated after processing. *Listeria* is killed by pasteurization and cooking however, contamination may occur after cooking but before packaging. *Listeria monocytogenes*, unlike most other foodborne pathogens will continue to grow on foods stored in the refrigerator. The bacteria can also be spread to the hands by contact with a contaminated product or work surface during food preparation.

### Who is at risk?

Those who are at the highest risk of serious illness include, pregnant women and their unborn/newborn children, the elderly, people with weakened immune systems ( HIV, diabetes, AIDS, Chemotherapy and transplant patients). The disease can be successfully treated with antibiotics if diagnosed early. If you have symptoms consult your physician.

You can minimize your risk by following package instructions for food preparation, cleaning and sanitizing surfaces used for food preparation, thoroughly cleaning fruit and vegetables before eating and by **washing hands** before, during and after handling any food especially raw meat and poultry. Health Care workers should use routine practices when providing care for a patient with listeriosis.

**For more information, contact the  
South Eastern Ontario Infection Control Network at  
At 613-548-3921 or 1-866-883-8428**

REFERENCES: Centres for Disease Control  
Canadian Food Inspection Agency  
Health Canada  
Control of Communicable Diseases Manual: 18<sup>th</sup> Edition: D Heyman