

Listeria

Public health information sheet

Listeria is a common type of bacteria found in dust, soil, water, plants, sewage and animal droppings. The bacteria can contaminate food, and if you eat it you can be infected and develop listeria disease (listeriosis). Most people with listeria only have a mild illness or no symptoms at all. However, it can be serious for pregnant women, babies, older people and those with weakened immune systems.

How it spreads

You get listeria through eating food contaminated by listeria bacteria. The bacteria are found in a variety of foods, at all stages of preparation, from raw food to well-cooked left-overs. Listeria bacteria can still grow on food stored in a fridge.

The disease can also be passed from mother to baby during pregnancy and childbirth.

Symptoms

Not everyone with listeria becomes unwell. Those who develop symptoms may have:

- mild fever
- headache
- aches and pains
- feeling or being sick
- diarrhoea (runny poo)
- stomach cramps

Symptoms usually appear around three weeks after someone has been infected, however sometimes it can take as long as two months to become unwell after infection.

People at higher risk

Listeria can be very dangerous for certain groups of people if they are infected. It can cause:

- miscarriage and stillbirth in pregnant women
- difficulty breathing, chest infections and inflammation of the brain (meningitis) in newborn babies
- serious illness in older people with complex medical conditions and those with weakened immune systems.

If you have symptoms

Seek health advice if you have symptoms or think you've eaten contaminated food. Call your doctor, or call Healthline for free on 0800 611 116.

If you are pregnant and have symptoms contact your doctor or midwife urgently.

Treatment and recovery

Most people with mild symptoms do not require any treatment. People with more serious symptoms can be treated with antibiotics and often require hospital admission.

During pregnancy, getting treated quickly with antibiotics may help keep the infection from affecting your baby.

If you have listeria there is a risk you could pass it on to others. It's recommended you stay away from work, school, or day care until two days after your symptoms have gone away, and avoid having visitors in your home.

Prevention

Foods to avoid when pregnant

It's recommended pregnant women avoid foods more likely to be contaminated with listeria germs. These include:

- uncooked, smoked or ready-to-eat fish or seafood, including oysters, smoked ready-to-eat fish, sashimi or sushi
- paté, hummus-based dips and spreads
- ham and all other chilled pre-cooked meat products including chicken, and fermented or dried sausages such as salami
- pre-prepared or stored salads (including fruit salads) and raw coleslaws (unpasteurised)
- milk and any food that contains unpasteurised milk
- soft-serve ice creams
- soft, semi-soft, or surface-ripened soft cheese (such as brie, camembert, feta, ricotta, and roquefort).

Good food safety habits

You can keep food safe by:

- following good food hygiene practices, such as washing and drying hands thoroughly before and after handling and preparing food
- eating freshly-cooked or freshly-prepared foods
- washing raw fruit and vegetables very well before eating
- cooking food thoroughly to kill any listeria bacteria
- refrigerating leftovers immediately (cool hot foods for 30 minutes before refrigerating) and using them within two days. Leftovers should be reheated to steaming hot – at least 75° C before eating.

For more information

For more information visit:

- www.arphs.nz/listeria

For information on food safety during pregnancy visit:

- <http://www.mpi.govt.nz/food-safety/food-safety-for-consumers/food-and-pregnancy/list-of-safe-food-in-pregnancy>

If you are concerned about listeria call Healthline for free on 0800 611 116 or contact your doctor or practice nurse.

If you are pregnant you can call your midwife or doctor for more advice.