

Listeriosis

Public Health – Factsheet

What is listeriosis?

Listeriosis is an intestinal* illness (rare, but can be serious) caused by the bacteria, or germ, *Listeria monocytogenes* (more commonly known as *Listeria*). *Listeria* is widespread in our environment and can be found in the soil, vegetation, water, sewage and feces (poop) of animals and humans.

What are the symptoms of listeriosis?

The symptoms of listeriosis are similar to those of the flu. The illness usually starts suddenly with nausea and vomiting, stomach cramps and diarrhea, followed by fever and muscle aches. Symptoms can last anywhere from three to 70 days (the average is 21 days/3 weeks) after eating foods contaminated with *Listeria*.

Who is most at risk for getting listeriosis and is it really that rare?

Listeriosis is very rare. On average, only three to five cases are reported yearly in Manitoba. The disease mostly affects pregnant women and their unborn/newborn children, older adults and those with compromised immune systems (ex: people living with HIV or cancer, transplant patients taking immunosuppressant drugs). People with kidney disease and alcoholics are also at risk of becoming infected. The illness is highest in people 60 years of age and older.

How do I know if I have a serious case of listeriosis? Are the symptoms different?

Serious cases of listeriosis can develop into infections of the brain (or lining of the brain) and blood poisoning. Symptoms to watch for include headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance and convulsions. However, as noted earlier, the disease is rare, and the serious cases are usually found in older adults, newborn babies and those with weakened immune systems.

How do I know if my newborn baby is infected with the disease?

In newborn babies, symptoms of serious listeriosis include loss of appetite, lethargy (tiredness, inactivity),

jaundice (yellowing of the skin), skin rash and difficulty breathing.

IMPORTANT: If your newborn is showing these symptoms, get medical help immediately. If you think you have listeriosis, and are showing the severe symptoms described above, get medical help immediately.

What causes listeriosis?

Animals like cattle and sheep can carry *Listeria* without looking sick. Meats and dairy products from these infected animals can then become contaminated (tainted) by the bacteria. For instance, *Listeria* can be found in a variety of raw foods, such as unpasteurized (raw) milk, dairy products like soft cheeses and uncooked meats and vegetables.

Foods can also be contaminated with *Listeria* after processing, as in the case of hot dogs, cold cuts or deli meats. Vegetables can get the germ from the soil or from manure used as fertilizer.

NOTE: Unlike other harmful bacteria, *Listeria* will grow on foods stored in the fridge, and these infected foods will look, smell and taste normal.

How do people get this disease?

People can become infected by eating food contaminated (tainted) with the *Listeria* bacteria or germ. The odd time, healthy adults and children will get listeriosis, but they rarely become seriously ill.

Why is the risk of infection higher for pregnant women?

The *Listeria* germ is not usually spread from person to person – however, a pregnant woman with listeriosis can pass the germ on to her unborn/newborn child, through transplacental transmission or during delivery.

What should you do if you think you have listeriosis?

If you think you have listeriosis, you should see your doctor for testing, advice and treatment.

* an illness of the stomach and/or bowels

How is listeriosis diagnosed?

You get a blood test, or spinal fluid test, to look for the bacteria. If the *Listeria* germ is found, then you have listeriosis.

How is the infection treated?

Listeriosis can be treated with antibiotics. In the case of an infected pregnant woman, early diagnosis and treatment can often reduce the risk of the unborn/newborn child getting the infection – resulting in the birth of a healthy baby. There is no vaccine available at this time to prevent listeriosis.

How can I protect myself from listeriosis (particularly if I'm in a high-risk group)?

Here are some ways to reduce your chances of getting listeriosis:

- Wash your hands with soap and water before and after:
 - using the toilet
 - changing diapers
 - eating or preparing food
 - handling animals (pets, farm animals or wild animals)
- Raw meats (ex: beef, pork, chicken/turkey) should be completely cooked before eating.

- Raw vegetables should be thoroughly rinsed under running tap water before eating.
- Avoid unpasteurized (raw) milk or foods made from unpasteurized (raw) milk.

Those at risk should avoid foods such as:

- soft cheeses
- hot dogs
- deli meats and meat spreads
- refrigerated paté
- refrigerated smoked seafood and fish

Those at risk should also avoid contact with sick or dead animals and aborted animal fetuses.

What should I do if I have food that is recalled because of listeria contamination?

Avoid eating recalled products. Either throw them out, or return them to where you bought them. If you've eaten some of the contaminated food and do not have any symptoms, no tests or treatment are needed. However, if you become ill with fever or other symptoms of listeriosis, contact your doctor, or other health care provider, immediately, to let them know you've been exposed to a product contaminated with *Listeria*.

For more information

Talk to your doctor, or other health care provider, your local public health unit, or call Health Links-Info Santé 204-788-8200 in Winnipeg or toll-free 1-888-315-9257 outside Winnipeg.

Information is also available on the Manitoba Health website at www.gov.mb.ca/health/cdc/protocols/listeriosis.pdf