



Thunder Bay District
Health Unit

THE FACTS: *Listeriosis*

What is Listeria and where is it found?

Listeria is a bacterium found in soil and water. Animals such as cattle and sheep can carry the Bacterium without appearing ill and can contaminate foods of animal origin such as meats and dairy products. About 10% of healthy persons may also harmlessly carry this organism in their bowel and excrete it in their stool. The bacterium can be found in a variety of raw foods, such as uncooked meats and vegetables, as well as in processed foods that become contaminated after processing, such as soft cheeses and cold cuts at the deli counter. Vegetables can become contaminated from the soil or from manure used as fertilizer. Unpasteurized (raw) milk or foods made from unpasteurized milk may contain Listeria.

How do people get sick from Listeriosis and what are the symptoms?

Eating food contaminated with Listeria bacterium may cause an infection called listeriosis. Symptoms can be similar to the flu, with fever, muscle aches, and other gastrointestinal symptoms such as nausea or diarrhea. Listeriosis can be deadly if it causes meningitis, an infection of the fluid around the brain, causing headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance, or seizures. Up to 1 in 3 people with Listeria meningitis will die from the disease.

How common is listeriosis?

In the past 10 years, about 4 cases of listeriosis have been reported each year to the British Columbia Centre for Disease Control. This is a rate of about 1 case per million population each year, and probably reflects under-reporting. The estimated true rate is likely closer to around 7 cases per million, or about 30 cases each year in B.C.

Who is at risk of getting sick from listeriosis?

Pregnant women are about 20 times more likely than other healthy adults to get listeriosis. About one-third of listeriosis cases happen during pregnancy. Infected pregnant women may experience only a mild, flu-like illness; however, infection during pregnancy can lead to premature delivery, illness in the newborn, or stillbirth. Persons with weakened immune systems have higher risk of getting listeriosis. This includes persons with cancer, diabetes, kidney disease, or those who take glucocorticosteroid ("steroid") medications. Persons with AIDS are up to 300 times more likely to get listeriosis than people with normal immune systems. Elderly persons also are at higher risk.

How is listeriosis prevented?

Listeria bacterium is killed by pasteurization and by heating procedures used to prepare ready-to-eat processed meats. Good food processing and manufacturing practices reduce the risk of food contamination after processing.

How can I protect myself and my family?

- cook raw meat and poultry thoroughly
- wash raw vegetables thoroughly
- avoid raw (unpasteurized) milk, cheese or other foods made from raw milk
- keep uncooked meats separate from vegetables and from cooked foods and ready-to-eat foods
- separate utensils for raw and cooked foods
- wash hands, knives, and cutting boards after handling uncooked foods

If you are pregnant or have a weakened immune system

- avoid soft cheeses such as feta, Brie, Camembert, blue-veined, and Mexican-style cheese. There is no need to avoid hard cheeses, processed cheeses, cream cheeses, cottage cheese or yogurt
- avoid refrigerated pates
- avoid refrigerated smoked fish products unless you have cooked them, for example, in a casserole
- thoroughly cook ready-to-eat foods, such as hot dogs, until steaming hot
- although the risk of listeriosis associated with foods from deli counters is low, pregnant women and immunosuppressed persons may choose to avoid these foods or thoroughly reheat cold cuts before eating.

Can listeriosis be treated?

Listeriosis can be treated with antibiotics. When illness due to *Listeria* occurs during pregnancy, antibiotics given promptly to the pregnant woman can often prevent infection of the fetes or newborn. Babies with listeriosis receive the same antibiotics as adults, although a combination of antibiotics is often used until physicians are certain of the diagnosis. Even with prompt treatment, some infections result in death, especially in the elderly and those with other serious medical problems.

**For Further Information Contact the Infectious Disease Program at 625-8318
or toll free 1-888-294-6630, ext. 8318.**

