

### **What is listeriosis?**

Listeriosis is a serious infection caused by eating meats or unpasteurized dairy products contaminated with the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*.

### **Who gets listeriosis?**

Listeriosis primarily affects people to be considered "at risk" such as pregnant women and their unborn babies, newborns, and adults with weakened immune systems.

### **What are the symptoms?**

The symptoms of listeriosis may include sudden onset of fever, muscle aches, chills, and sometimes nausea or diarrhea. If the infection spreads to the nervous system, serious complications such as stiff neck, headache, confusion, convulsions and coma may occur. Infected pregnant women may experience only a mild gastrointestinal illness, but *Listeria* can be transmitted to the fetus through the placenta even if the mother is not showing signs of illness. This can lead to infections in the newborn, premature delivery, miscarriage or stillbirth.

### **How long after exposure do symptoms occur?**

During outbreaks, cases have occurred between 3-70 days after eating a contaminated product. The average time between exposure to a contaminated food product and onset of illness is estimated to be approximately three weeks.

### **How is listeriosis diagnosed?**

Listeriosis is confirmed by culturing *Listeria monocytogenes* from blood, spinal fluid, placenta or other sites of infection.

### **How is listeriosis treated?**

Your physician can prescribe specific antibiotics for the treatment of listeriosis. When pregnant women with listeriosis are given antibiotics, in most cases the antibiotics will prevent infection of the fetus or newborn.

### **Where are these bacteria found? How does it get into food?**

*Listeria* is found in many areas of the environment including soil, groundwater, vegetables or other plants. Animals and people can carry *Listeria* in their intestines without becoming sick. *Listeria* 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. *Listeria* can also be found in unpasteurized milk or foods made from unpasteurized milk.

### **What about refrigerated foods?**

Unlike most other bacteria that cause foodborne illnesses such as Salmonella or E. coli O157:H7, *Listeria* can grow under refrigeration. *Listeria* is killed by pasteurization and cooking; however, in some ready-to-eat foods such as hot dogs and luncheon meats, contamination may occur after cooking but before packaging.

**General recommendations to prevent listeriosis:**

- Thoroughly cook raw food from animal sources such as beef, pork or poultry
- Wash raw vegetables thoroughly before eating
- Keep uncooked meats separate from cooked and ready-to-eat foods
- Avoid unpasteurized milk or foods made from unpasteurized milk
- Wash hands, knives and cutting boards after handling uncooked foods
- Eat perishable or ready-to-eat foods as soon as possible

**Additional recommendations for persons at high risk, such as pregnant women and persons with weakened immune systems:**

- Do not eat hot dogs, luncheon or deli meats, unless reheated until steaming hot.
- Avoid getting fluid from hot dog packages on other foods, utensils, and food preparation surfaces, and wash hands after handling hot dogs and luncheon or deli meats.
- Do not eat soft cheeses such as feta, Brie, and Camembert, blue veined cheeses, or Mexican-style cheeses such as queso blanco, queso fresco, and Panela, unless they have labels that clearly state they are made from pasteurized milk.
- Do not eat refrigerated pâtés or meat spreads. Canned or shelf-stable (product that does not have to be refrigerated until it has been opened) pâtés and meat spreads may be eaten.
- Do not eat refrigerated smoked seafood, unless it is contained in a cooked dish, such as a casserole. Examples of refrigerated smoked seafood, such as salmon, trout, whitefish, cod, tuna or mackerel, is most often labeled as "nova-style," "lox," "kippered", "smoked," or "jerky". The fish is found in the refrigerator section or sold at deli counters of grocery stores and delicatessens. Canned or shelf-stable smoked seafood may be eaten.