

What is listeriosis?

Listeriosis is a relatively uncommon disease caused by the bacteria *Listeria monocytogenes*. In the Northern Territory 4 cases of listeriosis have been reported for the 10 year period from 1991 to 2001. Over the same time period, between 34 to 71 cases have been reported throughout Australia each year.

How is it spread?

The disease is generally spread by eating food contaminated with the bacteria. Certain foods have a higher risk of being contaminated by the bacteria. It can also pass from pregnant woman to her unborn baby via the placenta, or to the baby at time of birth.

The bacteria is widespread in nature and commonly found in soil, water, sewage and most animals. Some exposure to the bacterium is generally unavoidable.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms can develop between 3 to 70 days after infection but most commonly around 21 days.

Healthy people may have few if any symptoms.

Those who do have symptoms may have fever, headache, tiredness, muscle aches and pains, abdominal cramps, nausea and diarrhoea. If infection spreads to the nervous system symptoms such as stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance and convulsions may occur.



Who is at risk?

The people most at risk from infection are:

- anyone who has a weakened immune system through chronic disease, illness or is on steroids
- the elderly
- newborn babies
- pregnant women and their unborn babies



Although a pregnant woman may have few or no symptoms, the risk of passing the infection to her unborn baby is high. Infection of the unborn baby usually occurs about 3 days after the mother is infected, and may lead to miscarriage, stillbirth, premature birth or a seriously ill newborn.



What is the infectious period?

Infected people can shed the bacteria in their faeces for several months.

Mothers of infected newborns may pass on the bacteria in vaginal discharges and urine for 7 to 10 days after giving birth.



What is the treatment?

Listeriosis can be effectively treated with antibiotics if treatment is given promptly. Newborn infants have a high mortality rate despite antibiotic treatment.

How can listeriosis be prevented?

Unlike most other food-contaminating bacteria, listeria can grow in the refrigerator, however it is readily killed during cooking.

General preventative measures include:

- thoroughly cook raw food from animal sources, such as beef, pork or chicken
- wash raw vegetables thoroughly before eating
- keep uncooked meats separate from vegetables, cooked foods and ready-to – eat foods
- avoid unpasteurised milk and products made from unpasteurised milk
- wash hands, knives and cutting boards after handling uncooked foods

Pregnant women and those with weakened immune systems may choose to follow these additional precautions:

- eat only freshly prepared foods
- re-heat left over foods or ready-to-eat foods such as hot dogs until steaming hot
- avoid ready-to-eat foods which have been refrigerated more than a day
- avoid eating dips and salad dressings which have previously been exposed to raw vegetables even if they have been refrigerated
- avoid high risk foods such as pates, pre-packed sliced meat products, cooked diced chicken (as used in sandwich shops), soft cheeses (such as Brie, Camembert and ricotta), previously prepared coleslaws and salads, uncooked smoked fish, smoked shellfish and any food with an extended shelf life

Listeriosis has also been known to cause illness and abortion in animals so people at high risk of infection should avoid contact with animal placenta (afterbirth) and with aborted animal foetuses.

For more information contact your nearest Centre for Disease Control.

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