

Listeria monocytogenes

What is *Listeria monocytogenes*?

Listeria monocytogenes is a bacterium, found in the environment, particularly in soil and water. It has also been found in a variety of raw foods, such as uncooked meats and vegetables, as well as in processed foods such as soft cheeses, cold cuts, and hot dogs. Unpasteurized (raw) milk or foods made from unpasteurized milk may contain the bacterium.

Eating food contaminated with *Listeria* may cause listeriosis, a severe foodborne illness. Listeriosis can cause high fever, severe headache, neck stiffness and nausea. Blood or brain infections can also occur, either of which can be fatal. Additionally, *Listeria* may cause miscarriage or stillbirth. Pregnant women, the elderly and people with weakened immune systems are particularly at risk.

What is being done to prevent *Listeria* and protect consumers?

Efforts are being made to reduce the risks associated with *Listeria monocytogenes* throughout the entire food production process. Meat processors have also developed internationally recognized systems known as HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point) plans to control foodborne bacteria. These plans identify potential food safety hazards such as bacterial contamination, and monitor the most important production steps (critical points) to ensure these hazards are controlled before the product is sent to the grocery store.

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) administers and enforces twelve Acts governing food safety and food inspection, including monitoring food processing, and inspecting packaging dates and labels at retail. CFIA also develops tests to better detect new and existing pathogens in foods and food manufacturing processes.

What can consumers do?

Consumers can take simple steps to protect themselves from foodborne illness, including *Listeria*.

Listeria will grow slowly on foods stored in a refrigerator and can be spread through contact with an infected product or surface, such as hands or counter tops, so consumers should remember to:

- Keep the refrigerator at 4°C (40°F) or colder. Refrigerate or freeze foods promptly;
- Avoid raw, unpasteurised milk or foods made from it, such as raw milk cheese;
- Wash hands before and after handling food and frequently while cooking, especially after handling raw meat and poultry;
- Thoroughly cook or boil foods such as hot dogs and poultry products until they are steaming hot;
- Avoid cross contamination of food by washing utensils, plates and cutting boards that have come into contact with raw meat and poultry, in hot, soapy water;
- Wash all raw fruits and vegetables before you prepare and eat them;
- Follow “use by” dates especially on packaged goods with a long shelf life.

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Additional suggestions for people at risk

According to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, people who are at greater risk for the disease should also:

- Avoid soft cheeses such as feta, Brie, Camembert;
- Avoid smoked fish;
- Left-over foods or ready-to-eat foods, such as hot dogs, and deli meats, should be cooked until steaming hot before eating;
- Although the risk of listeriosis associated with foods from deli counters is relatively low, pregnant women and immunosuppressed persons may choose to avoid these foods or thoroughly reheat cold cuts before eating.