

# IDRS Infectious Disease Reporting System

Disease Reporting 24 Hours a Day

Columbus Public Health and Franklin County Public Health

## LISTERIOSIS

Listeriosis is an infection caused by eating food contaminated with the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*. The disease has serious effects for pregnant women, newborns and adults with weakened immune systems.

### Symptoms

Listeriosis causes symptoms within 3-70 days of exposure to the bacteria. These may include:

- Fever
- Muscle aches
- Sometimes nausea or diarrhea
- Headache, stiff neck (this may mean the infection is spreading to the brain and spinal cord)
- Confusion, loss of balance or seizures (fits or spells) may occur.
- Infection during pregnancy can lead to premature delivery, infection of the newborn or even stillbirth.

### Transmission

- *Listeria* is found in soil and water. Vegetables may become contaminated from the soil or from manure used as fertilizer. Animals may carry the bacterium, so meats and dairy products can be contaminated.
- People get listeriosis by eating contaminated food. Foods like unpasteurized milk or cheese, hot dogs, undercooked meat, and cold cuts at the deli counter may carry *Listeria*.
- Although healthy people may eat contaminated foods without becoming ill, some people are at higher risk of getting listeriosis, including pregnant women, older adults, and people with weakened immune systems (may be due to cancer, AIDS, diabetes, medications, etc.).
- About one-third of listeriosis cases happen during pregnancy. Newborns rather than pregnant women themselves suffer the serious effects of infection in pregnancy.

### Treatment

- When infection occurs during pregnancy, antibiotics given promptly to pregnant women can often prevent infection of the fetus or newborn. Babies with listeriosis receive the same antibiotics as adults. Even with treatment, some infections result in death. This is more likely in the elderly and in people with other serious medical problems.

### Prevention

- Thoroughly cook raw meat, and keep uncooked meats separate from vegetables, cooked foods and ready-to-eat foods. Even a drop of raw meat juice can contaminate a surface, plate, or other food.
- Wash raw vegetables thoroughly before eating. Wash utensils and surfaces that touch raw foods.
- Avoid raw (unpasteurized) milk or milk products made from raw milk.

### Additional Information

Pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems should follow these guidelines as well:

- Avoid soft cheeses such as feta, brie, Camembert, blue-veined, and Mexican-style cheese. Hard cheese, processed cheese, and cheeses and yogurt made from pasteurized milk are safe.
- Cook foods such as hot dogs, bologna, raw fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables until steaming hot.
- Leftovers from meals should be thoroughly heated before eating.
- Avoid deli or luncheon meats, and refrigerated meat spreads, pates, or smoked seafood. Canned versions of these foods may be eaten, because these are thoroughly cooked in the canning process.

**All information is general in nature and is not intended to be used as a substitute for appropriate professional advice.**



c/o Franklin County Public Health, 280 East Broad Street, Columbus, Ohio 43215-4562

Call: (614) 525-8888 • After Hours: (614) 525-3965 • Fax: (614) 525-8890

Email: [idsr@franklincountyohio.gov](mailto:idsr@franklincountyohio.gov) • Web: [www.idrsinfo.org](http://www.idrsinfo.org)

