

Listeriosis

What is listeriosis?

Listeriosis is an uncommon disease caused by the bacteria *Listeria monocytogenes*. It is an infection in the bowel which can spread to the blood and other organs such as the brain, liver and bones. In the Northern Territory there are usually less than 3 cases per year.

How do you pick it up?

The bacteria are common in the environment and thrive on food, even in the fridge. There are some foods which are recognised to be at high risk of contamination with *Listeria* and the disease is generally picked up by eating these foods. They include:

- ready-to-eat meats, such as ham, hot dogs, deli meats,
- seafood eaten cold such as smoked salmon
- soft cheeses such as Brie and Camembert
- pre-prepared salads.

See below for a detailed list. It is not always possible to determine the source.

The *Listeria* bacteria can also pass from a pregnant woman to her unborn baby via the placenta, or to the baby during birth.

As the bacteria are widespread in nature and commonly found in soil, water, sewage and most animals, some exposure to these bacteria is generally unavoidable.

What are the symptoms?

Young, healthy people may have few if any symptoms, but the disease can be severe in at-risk groups.

Symptoms often include:

- fever
- headache
- tiredness

- muscle aches
- 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.

Symptoms may develop from a few hours after exposure to the bacteria to 3 months later, but most often occur after about 3 weeks.

Who is at risk?

The following groups are at greatest risk of severe disease:

anyone who has a weakened immune system, due to chronic disease, diabetes, alcoholism, steroid treatment or other drugs that affect the immune system

- 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 on to the unborn baby is high usually occurring about 3 days after the mother is infected. This infection 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. However, it is very unusual to catch the infection from someone else.

What is the treatment?

Listeriosis can be effectively treated with antibiotics if treatment is given promptly. Newborn infants have a high mortality rate (20-30%) despite antibiotic treatment.

How can listeriosis be prevented?

Unlike most other food-contaminating bacteria, *Listeria* can survive and grow in the refrigerator, although it is readily killed during cooking.

General food hygiene measures should be followed, including:

- 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 or milk products
- wash hands, knives and cutting boards after handling uncooked foods.

Additional precautions for vulnerable people (pregnant women, elderly and those with weakened immune systems)

These include:

- eat only freshly prepared foods
- re-heat left over foods or ready-to-eat foods such as hot dogs until steaming hot

They should also avoid:

- eating soft cheeses (such as Brie, Camembert, blue-vein and ricotta)
- high risk foods such as pâté, pre-packed sliced meat products, cooked diced chicken (as used in sandwich shops)
- raw seafood and uncooked smoked seafood (such as uncooked smoked salmon, uncooked smoked fish, smoked shellfish and any seafood with an extended shelf life)
- eating dips and salad dressings which have previously been exposed to raw vegetables even if they have been refrigerated.
- ready-to-eat foods and pre-packed cold salads including coleslaw and fresh fruit salad (including pre-cut melons such as rockmelon or watermelon)
- sprouted seeds or raw mushrooms contact with animal placenta (afterbirth) and with aborted birth products.

For more information contact the Centre for Disease Control in your region

Alice Springs	8951 7540
Darwin	8922 8044
Katherine	8973 9049
Nhulunbuy	8987 0357
Tennant Creek	8962 4259

or

<https://health.nt.gov.au/professionals/centre-for-disease-control/cdc-contacts>