



## Listeria Infection

### Environmental Health Guide

#### What is Listeria infection?

Listeria infection or *listeriosis* is a rare, flu-like illness caused by eating food that contains Listeria bacteria. These bacteria are sometimes found in food that has not been properly prepared or stored, particularly in certain high risk food types. (See the list *High Risk Foods*.)

Most healthy people can eat these foods without becoming sick. However, others can become very ill or even die. Fortunately, there are only about seven cases of Listeria infection each year in Western Australia.

#### Who gets Listeria Infection?

People at risk include:

- Pregnant women and their unborn babies, during the whole pregnancy
- Newborn babies
- Some older people
- Anyone whose immune system has been weakened by long-term disease or drugs:
  - Cancer and chemotherapy
  - Leukaemia
  - Diabetes
  - Liver or kidney disease
  - HIV/AIDS
  - Organ transplant patients
  - Alcoholics
  - Intravenous drug users

Listeria infection in pregnant women, **at any stage of pregnancy**, can lead to miscarriage, stillbirth or premature birth, or very sick newborn babies.

#### Signs and Symptoms of Listeria Infection

Many people with Listeria infection have few signs or symptoms, while others feel as if they have the flu. These signs and symptoms include:

- fever and chills
- nausea (feeling sick in the stomach)
- diarrhoea
- headache
- aches and pains

These symptoms can occur up to two months after eating the infected food.

#### What to Do After Eating High Risk Foods

Remember, Listeria infection is rare and the risk of developing it after eating high risk food is low. However, if you are a person at risk and you are unsure about the safety of something you have eaten, note what it was and when you ate it. If you later have any of the symptoms described above, see your doctor as soon as possible. Your doctor will decide if a test is necessary.



## What is the Treatment?

Listeria infection is easily treated with antibiotics. If you are in one of the high risk groups and develop a flu-like illness with a fever, see your doctor as soon as possible. If pregnant women are not treated, Listeria infection can lead to miscarriage, stillbirth or premature birth, or very sick newborn babies. If people with low immunity are not treated, they can develop blood poisoning or meningitis (infection of the lining of the brain), or even die.

## How to Avoid Listeria Infection

People at risk should avoid eating high risk foods, and prepare and store food safely. The box below is a guide to safe food handling and storage.

### Guide to Safe Preparation and Storage of Food

#### Clean

- ✓ Always wash hands, knives, and cutting boards with hot, soapy water before and after handling any raw food, and between different kinds of foods.
- ✓ Keep your fridge clean, especially after any liquid spills.
- ✓ Always wash fruit and vegetables, especially before eating them raw or juicing.

#### Separate

- ✓ Keep raw food separated from cooked foods and ready-to-eat foods.
- ✓ Always wrap or cover food.

#### Cook

- ✓ Listeria can be killed by heating. **Even high risk foods and left-overs are safe to eat if heated until steaming hot and eaten straight away.**
- ✓ **Heat food for at least two or three minutes until it is steaming hot (above 60°C), all the way through.** Heating for a short time will not kill Listeria.
- ✓ When using the microwave stop and stir the food a couple of times during heating. Microwaves heat food unevenly, so even if it seems to be piping hot, some parts of the food can still be cool and contain Listeria.
- ✓ Make sure meat and chicken are well cooked.
- ✓ Keep hot food steaming hot (above 60°C).

#### Chill

- ✓ Keep your fridge as cold as possible, without freezing the food (below 5°C).
- ✓ Refrigerate food, including leftovers, as soon as possible. Don't wait until foods have cooled - put them in the fridge as soon as they are cool enough to touch.
- ✓ Throw out food left out of the fridge for long periods, especially in the summer. Be particularly careful during picnics and barbecues where food is often left in the heat. *If in doubt, throw it out.*
- ✓ Thaw frozen food in the fridge or microwave - never at room temperature.
- ✓ Avoid eating food which has been stored in the fridge for more than 24 hours; this includes home made food.

**The Key message to remember is make sure cooked foods are heated to steaming hot and eaten straight away.**



## High Risk Foods

High risk foods include:

- pâté
- cooked diced chicken (e.g. as used in chicken sandwiches)
- meat products (e.g. polony, ham and other manufactured meats)
- soft cheeses (e.g. Brie, Camembert, fetta and ricotta)
- self service or packed salads (e.g. coleslaw)
- cold, smoked and raw seafood (e.g. smoked salmon, oysters and sashimi).
- soft serve ice cream and thickshakes

## Safe Foods

These include:

- ✓ Well washed fruit and vegetables
- ✓ All food that is freshly cooked (if eaten while still hot)
- ✓ All tinned food
- ✓ Breads and cereals
- ✓ Dried food (such as nuts, fruit, beans)
- ✓ Pasteurised milk and milk products (such as yogurt, cheese spreads in jars, hard cheeses)
- ✓ Takeaways, if eaten steaming hot or handled and stored properly

## Key Points to Remember:

- ❖ EAT HOT
- ❖ EAT FRESH
- ❖ KEEP CLEAN

## Further Information

For further information contact your local government Environmental Health Officer, or

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