

FOOD SAFETY

**AVOIDING
LISTERIA**

ESPECIALLY FOR:

- pregnant women and their unborn babies
- newborn babies
- people with weakened immune systems
- frail older people



What is listeria?

Listeria is a common bacterium, which can cause an uncommon but potentially serious illness called listeriosis. Listeria is found widely in soil, water, and plants and in the droppings and faeces of animals and humans.

How do people get listeriosis?

Listeriosis is a food-borne infection that results from eating contaminated food. In particular, ready-to-eat products and foods with a long refrigerated shelf life are often linked to outbreaks of listeria.

Who is at serious risk of listeriosis?

- Pregnant women and their unborn babies
- Newborn babies
- People with weakened immune systems¹
- Frail older people².

If you are not sure about your risk of being infected, talk to your doctor.

What are the symptoms?

It takes between a few days and a few weeks for symptoms to show up. After being infected with listeria, you may have no symptoms at all or you may become ill with:

- mild fever
- headache
- aches and pains.

You may also feel sick or vomit.

In a small number of cases these symptoms can progress to more severe forms of the illness, such as meningitis and blood poisoning.

In pregnant women, symptoms may be mild, but the consequences can be severe as listeriosis can result in miscarriage, premature birth or stillbirth and can also cause severe infection in the newborn baby.

If you think you might have listeriosis, see your doctor.

¹ Including cancer patients, diabetics, people taking immunosuppressive or cytotoxic treatment, people with alcoholism or liver or kidney disease.

² While this group is not strictly defined, a frail older person can be considered as a person over 65 who is in a vulnerable state of health that puts them at greater risk of further deterioration, ill-health or illness. Further information about frailty in older people is available at this link:
<http://www.health.govt.nz/publication/food-and-nutrition-guidelines-healthy-older-people-background-paper>

How can listeriosis be prevented?

The risk of serious illness from listeria infection can be reduced by safe food handling practices. Listeria is one of the few food bacteria that will grow on food even if it's in the fridge and can withstand freezing. It is wise to store any perishable food in the fridge, but it is also important to use it within two days.

Safety with food

You can keep food safe by:

- avoiding cross-contamination by keeping cooked foods and ready-to-eat foods separate from raw and unprocessed foods
- washing your hands, utensils and chopping boards before preparing different foods, to avoid cross-contamination
- cooking food thoroughly
- eating freshly cooked food as soon as possible after cooking
- storing leftover foods in cleaned sealed containers in a fridge and using within two days
- reheating leftover food thoroughly so that it is steaming hot, that is, above 72°C. (Take special care to heat thoroughly and evenly when using a microwave oven by stirring frequently.)
- washing and drying whole raw fruit and vegetables thoroughly
- ensuring that food is eaten before the use-by date
- cleaning the fridge regularly and checking that the temperature is between 2–4°C.

Unsafe foods for people at risk:

- X** uncooked, smoked or ready-to-eat fish or seafood, including oysters, smoked ready-to-eat fish, sashimi or sushi*
- X** pate, hummus-based dips and spreads
- X** ham and all other chilled pre-cooked meat products including chicken, and fermented or dried sausages such as salami*
- X** pre-prepared or stored salads (including fruit salads) and coleslaws
- X** raw (unpasteurised) milk and any food that contains unpasteurised milk*
- X** soft-serve ice creams
- X** soft, semi-soft or surface-ripened soft cheese (eg, brie, camembert, feta, ricotta, roquefort)*.



*Note that these foods are safe to eat if heated thoroughly to steaming hot, that is, above 72°C, where appropriate.

Safer foods for people at risk:

- ✓** freshly cooked foods
- ✓** pasteurised dairy foods, eg,
 - milk, UHT milk, yoghurt
 - hard cheese (eg, cheddar, colby, edam)





- processed cheese, cheese spread, cottage cheese and cream cheese. Eat these cheeses within two days of opening the pack.
- Purchase all cheese in sealed packs, in small quantities and use by the use-by date.

- ✓ freshly washed vegetables and fruit
- ✓ freshly prepared salads
- ✓ bread and baked foods without cream or custard
- ✓ dried food
- ✓ cereals
- ✓ beverages.



MORE INFORMATION: Your local public health service can give you more information on food preparation, storage and safety; talk to your doctor or nurse or contact the Ministry for Primary Industries – food safety group, <http://www.foodsafety.govt.nz/> or Freephone 0800 693 721.



New Zealand Government

This resource is available from www.healthed.govt.nz or the Authorised Provider at your local DHB.

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