Listeria and food

This fact sheet provides information about the risks associated with listeria and provides advice in relation to food with a high risk of listeria contamination.

What is Listeria?

*Listeria monocytogenes* is a type of listeria bacteria that can cause a serious illness called listeriosis in some people. The major cause of listeria infection is through the consumption of contaminated food.

Listeriosis is uncommon in healthy people, however, it can be dangerous for people at high risk.

Who is at risk?

The following groups are at high risk of listeriosis from consumption of high risk foods:
- older people (generally considered to be persons over 65 years)
- pregnant women, their unborn and newborn children
- people of all ages whose immune systems have been weakened by disease or illness, for example cancer, leukaemia, AIDS, diabetes, liver or kidney disease
- anyone on medication that can suppress the immune system, for example, prednisone or cortisone, including organ transplant patients.

What are the symptoms of listeriosis?

Listeriosis is a rare disease and if infected, healthy people, including pregnant women, experience few or no symptoms. If symptoms are present, they may vary from minor complaints such as fever, headache, aches and pains, vomiting and diarrhoea, to more serious forms of the illness such as meningitis (infection of the lining of the brain) and septicaemia (blood poisoning).

The average time from exposure to the development of symptoms of the disease is about 3 weeks.

What foods have a high risk of listeria contamination?

High risk foods are usually chilled ready-to-eat foods including:
- pate, uncooked smoked seafood, soft cheeses (eg. brie, camembert, ricotta)
- cooked diced chicken (as used in sandwiches)
- cold meat products (eg. cold roast meat, processed meats such as ham and salami)
- pre-prepared and stored salads (eg. packaged salads from supermarkets, buffets and salad bars)
- raw seafood (eg. oysters)
- unpasteurised dairy products.
What foods are considered safe?
Foods that are generally considered to be safe from listeria contamination include:
- freshly cooked foods
- hard cheeses
- fresh pasteurised milk and milk products
- UHT milk
- yoghurt
- freshly washed fruit and vegetables
- canned foods.

How can food be prepared safely?
- conventional cooking destroys listeria. Freshly cooked food is the safest. Hot food should be thoroughly cooked and kept above 60°C
- refrigeration does not stop the growth of listeria. Listeria is one of the few bacteria that will grow in refrigerated foods. High risk foods that have been prepared and then stored for more than 12 hours should not be eaten by at-risk persons
- raw fruits and vegetables should be thoroughly washed before eating
- uncooked meats should be kept covered and separate from cooked food and ready-to-eat food
- knives and cutting boards used to prepare uncooked foods should not be used to prepare cooked or ready-to-eat food
- always maintain good food and personal hygiene practices when preparing or handling food.

For further information
Queensland Health has a variety of fact sheets with detailed information on food safety. Fact sheets can be accessed from the Queensland Health website at www.health.qld.gov.au/foodsafety.

Contact your local Queensland Health Public Health Unit (PHU) if you have any further questions (PHU contact details below).

Queensland Health Public Health Units

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