

5 August 2009

Listeria precautions for pregnant women

Queensland Health is reminding pregnant women to avoid eating foods associated with listeria bacteria, following an increase of listeriosis illness across Australia.

While 68 Australians contracted listeriosis in 2008, Deputy Director-General Dr Aaron Groves said 56 cases had been identified so far across Australia in the first half of this year (refer to table below).

Queensland recorded 12 cases last year and has already recorded nine cases so far this year.

He said the illness was not transmitted from person to person. Food safety investigators believed five of these cases were linked to one food source.

"Listeria infection is uncommon and causes few symptoms, if any, in healthy people. However, it can be very dangerous for people at risk," Dr Groves said.

"We have taken the precaution of alerting the public because pregnant women, people over the age of 65 and people with suppressed immunity, such as those being treated for cancer, are at higher risk from listeriosis.

"Listeria bacteria are found widely in the environment and may multiply in raw, undercooked or contaminated foods," Dr Groves said.

Listeriosis symptoms include fever, headache, tiredness, aches and pains, diarrhoea, nausea and abdominal cramps. More severe cases may lead to meningitis or septicaemia.

Pregnant women with even mild symptoms of listeriosis can be at risk of miscarriage, premature delivery and in rare cases, stillbirth, and should see their doctor as soon as possible if they have symptoms consistent with infection.

Listeria can be present in foods such as cold meat, cold cooked chicken, pre-packaged salad, soft cheese, unpasteurised dairy products, soft-serve ice-cream, pate and chilled seafood.

Dr Groves said Queensland Health, in collaboration with national and other State and Territory public health and food safety authorities, was investigating a possible association with chicken wraps distributed to companies in South East Queensland, including Virgin Blue, up to the end of June 2009.

The source of the contamination was an ingredient supplied to the manufacturer of the wraps, and not Virgin Blue or other businesses that received the wraps. The wraps with contaminated ingredients were completely withdrawn from the market in early July.

Queensland Health, on the advice of national experts from the Communicable Diseases Network Australia, was warning the public as a precaution because it can occasionally take up to 70 days for someone who eats food contaminated with listeria to get sick.

He said all companies are co-operating fully with investigations.

(more)

Dr Groves reassured Queenslanders there were no current concerns with food on Virgin Blue flights, because the chicken wraps under investigation had not been available since the end of June.

Number of listeria notifications, 2006-2009 (note: 2009 figure is year-to-date total)

| Year | QLD | Australia |
|------|-----|-----------|
| 2006 | 3 | 61 |
| 2007 | 7 | 50 |
| 2008 | 12 | 68 |
| 2009 | 9 | 56 |

Additional information about listeria can be found on the Queensland Health website at http://access.health.qld.gov.au/hid/InfectionsandParasites/BacterialInfections/listeriosis_fs.pdf or on the Food Standards Australia and New Zealand website at <http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/srcfiles/Listeria.pdf>

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Anyone with medical concerns should contact their GP or call 13 HEALTH (13 432585)