



KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE

HEALTH
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

LISTERIOSIS



 KwaZulu-Natal Department of Health

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1. What is Listeriosis

Listeriosis is a serious, but treatable and preventable disease caused by the bacterium, *Listeria monocytogenes*. The bacteria can be found in soil, water and vegetation. Animal products and fresh produce such as fruits and vegetables can be contaminated from these sources.

2. Who can get Listeriosis

Anyone can get Listeriosis. Those at high risk of severe disease are newborns, the elderly, immunocompromised individuals, pregnant women and their unborn babies; and those with underlying conditions such as HIV, diabetes, cancer, chronic liver or kidney disease.

3. Signs and symptoms

The incubation period varies and can be between 3 – 70 days (median 3 weeks).

Up to 10% of people may be asymptomatic carriers.

Symptoms are usually mild and may include flu like symptoms: fever, myalgia, malaise and sometimes nausea or diarrhoea.

In at-risk patients, spread of infection to the nervous system can cause meningitis leading to headaches, confusion, stiff neck, loss of balance or convulsions.

Bacteraemia (infection of the blood stream) may also occur.

4. Diagnosis is made by culturing *Listeria monocytogenes* from clinical specimens such blood, cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) and amniotic fluid.

5. Treatment

Gastro-enteritis due to *Listeria* usually does not require treatment.

Meningitis or septicaemia due to *Listeria* can be life threatening and should be treated with intravenous antibiotics such as ampicillin alone or in combination with other antibiotics such as gentamicin.

6. Prevention

- Unlike most other foodborne pathogens, *Listeria monocytogenes* can grow in refrigerated foods that are contaminated. To prevent this, it is recommended to have fridge temperatures below 4°C; and freezer temperatures below -18°C.
- Therefore, those at high risk of Listeriosis should avoid the following foods:
 - Raw or unpasteurized milk, or dairy products that contain unpasteurized milk;
 - Soft cheeses (e.g. feta, goat, Brie);
 - Foods from delicatessen counters (e.g. prepared salads, cold meats) that have not been heated/reheated adequately;
 - Refrigerated pâtés.
- There is no vaccine or pre-exposure prophylaxis for preventing infection. The main preventive measure is to always ensure that good basic hygiene is followed. This includes:
 - Using only pasteurized dairy products;
 - Thoroughly cooking raw foods from animal sources, such as beef, pork or poultry;
 - Washing your hands before preparing food, before eating and after going to the toilet;
 - Washing and decontamination of kitchen surfaces and utensils regularly, particularly after preparing raw meat, poultry and eggs, including industrial kitchens;
 - Washing raw vegetables and fruits thoroughly before eating.

The WHO has advised on following the five keys to food safety:

- Keep clean. Wash your hands before handling food and often during food preparation. Please do not get tired of washing your hands if it means washing hundred times a day, please do it!

- If you are handling or storing raw food, do not touch already cooked food unless you have thoroughly washed your hands and food preparation utensils. In other words separate raw from cooked food.
- Cook food thoroughly, never eat half cooked or uncooked food especially meat products. Food that does not usually need cooking before eating, needs to be thoroughly washed with clean running water. For families with no source of clean running water need to boil their water before domestic use.
- Keep food at safe temperatures. Food to be kept cold should be refrigerated and food to be served hot should be served hot.
- Use safe water for domestic use at all times and use pasteurized milk products. In situations where pasteurization is not possible, for own domestic consumption, please boil the milk prior to use

