

Health Bytes

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Listeriosis



According to the World Health Organisation the Listeriosis outbreak in South Africa that resulted in more than 180 deaths, is the **largest outbreak to date**.

Ready-to-eat, processed meat – specifically polony and viennas made at two production plants (Enterprise® and Rainbow®) – is strongly associated with development of Listeriosis. The National Department of Health has released a cautionary notice indicating that **persons at risk of Listeriosis should not consume polony, viennas or ready-to-eat meats** from these companies.

What is Listeriosis?



- A **serious bacterial disease** caused by the Gram-positive, rod shaped bacterium, *Listeria monocytogenes*.
- This bacterium is can be found in **soil, water and contaminated food**.
- **Animals and food** products such as vegetables can become contaminated from these sources.
- Infection with *Listeria* usually results in **gastro-enteritis** with symptoms ranging from mild to severe.
- Listeriosis can lead to **meningitis or septicaemia** in persons with weak immunity
- In pregnant women, Listeriosis may result in **pregnancy loss** (abortion) and **meningitis of the infant**.
- **Anyone can get Listeriosis**.
- *Listeria* can **survive** in normal temperatures associated with **refrigeration (4°C)**.

How is Listeriosis transmitted?

Ingestion of contaminated food products:

- **raw or unpasteurised** milk and soft cheeses,
- vegetables,
- **processed foods**,
- **ready-to-eat** meats and
- **Smoked** fish products



SYMPTOMS

- The **incubation period** varies and can be **between 3 – 70 days** (median 3 weeks).
- Up to **10% of people may be asymptomatic** carriers. This figure may be higher in abattoir and laboratory workers who work with *Listeria monocytogenes* cultures.
- In the average healthy adult, infection is usually asymptomatic.
- **Symptoms are usually mild** and may include **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** may also occur.
- Pregnant women may present with mild **flu-like illness** associated with headache, fever and myalgia.
- **Infections during pregnancy** can lead to premature births, infection of the new born with permanent disability, and miscarriage or stillbirth.

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Prevent Listeriosis by following good basic hygiene



1. Keep clean

- Wash your hands with **soap** before and often during food preparation
- Wash your hands with soap after using the **toilet**
- Wash and sanitize all **surfaces** and **equipment** used for food preparation
- Protect kitchen areas and food from **insects, pests** and other animals

2. Use safe water and raw materials

- Use **safe water** or treat it to make it safe
- Select **fresh** and wholesome foods
- Choose foods processed for safety, such as **pasteurized milk**
- **Wash** fruits and vegetables, especially if eaten raw

- Do not use food beyond its **expiry date**

3. Separate raw and cooked

- **Separate** raw meat, poultry and seafood from other foods
- Use separate equipment and utensils such as knives and cutting boards for handling raw foods
- Store food in containers to **avoid contact between raw and prepared** foods

4. Cook thoroughly

- **Cook food thoroughly**, especially meat, poultry, eggs and seafood
- Bring foods like soups and stews to boiling to make sure that they have reached **70°C**. For meat and poultry, make sure that juices are

clear, not pink. Ideally, use a thermometer

- **Reheat** cooked food **thoroughly**
- **Avoid overcooking** when frying, grilling or baking food as this may produce toxic chemicals

5. Keep food at safe temperatures

- **Do not leave** cooked food at **room temperature** for more than 2 hours
- **Refrigerate promptly** all cooked and perishable food (preferably below 5°C)
- Keep cooked food **piping hot (more than 60°C)** prior to serving
- Do not store food too long even in the refrigerator
- **Do not thaw frozen food at room temperature**

References

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<http://www.indianfoodreview.com/the-sawyer-seminar/big-changes-in-food-safety>

www.foodstuffsa.co.za/food-safety-perspectives-worlds-worst-listeriosis-outbreak-sa/

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