



Listeria and Pregnancy

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What is *Listeria*?

Listeria is a kind of bacteria that is found in soil, water, and some animals, including cattle and poultry. When eaten, *Listeria* causes a foodborne illness called **listeriosis**. Listeriosis is one of the most serious types of food poisoning.

What are the symptoms of listeriosis?

Listeriosis can cause mild, flu-like symptoms such as fever, chills, muscle aches, and diarrhea or upset stomach. You also may have a stiff neck, headache, confusion, or loss of balance. Symptoms may appear as late as 2 months after you have eaten something with *Listeria*. Many pregnant women do not have any symptoms. Even if you do not feel sick, you can pass the infection to your **fetus**.

How can listeriosis affect pregnant women?

Pregnant women are 10 times more likely to get listeriosis than the general population. Vomiting and diarrhea can cause the body to lose too much water. This is called dehydration. Listeriosis also can cause **miscarriage**, **stillbirth**, or **preterm** labor.

How can listeriosis affect my baby?

Babies born with listeriosis may have serious infections of the blood or brain. Listeriosis can cause lifelong health problems for your baby, including intellectual disability, paralysis, seizures, blindness, or problems with the brain, kidneys, or heart. Listeriosis also can cause death in newborns.

What should I do if I think I have listeriosis?

If you think you have eaten food contaminated with *Listeria* or if you have any of the symptoms of listeriosis, contact your **obstetrician–gynecologist (ob-gyn)** or other health care professional right away. Remember that it can take 2 months for symptoms to appear.

How is listeriosis treated?

Your ob-gyn or other health care professional may give you a blood test to see if you have listeriosis. You may need to take **antibiotics** to treat the infection and prevent your fetus from becoming infected.

How can I help prevent listeriosis?

To help prevent listeriosis, avoid eating the following foods while you are pregnant:

- Unpasteurized milk and foods made with unpasteurized milk, including soft cheeses
- Hot dogs and luncheon meats, unless they are heated until steaming hot just before serving

- Refrigerated pâté and meat spreads
- Refrigerated smoked seafood
- Unwashed raw produce such as fruits and vegetables

Avoid all raw and undercooked seafood, eggs, meat, and poultry while you are pregnant. Do not eat sushi made with raw fish (cooked sushi is safe). Cooking and **pasteurization** are the only ways to kill *Listeria*.

What other food safety guidelines should I follow?

Follow these steps for food safety:

Clean

- Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds before and after touching raw food, and after using the bathroom, changing diapers, or touching an animal.
- Rinse all raw produce thoroughly under running water before eating, peeling, cutting, or cooking.
- Do not rinse raw meat or poultry before cooking. That can spread bacteria to other kitchen surfaces.
- Keep your kitchen clean. Wash your utensils, countertops, and cutting boards with soap and hot water after using them.

Separate

- Keep raw meat, poultry, eggs, seafood, and their juices away from other food.
- Use a separate cutting board for raw meat, poultry, and seafood.
- Do not put cooked food on a plate that also held raw food, unless the plate was washed.
- Do not put cooked food in the same sauce that was used to marinate raw food, unless the sauce is boiled first.

Cook

- Use a food thermometer to check that meat, poultry, seafood, and eggs are at a safe temperature.
- Place the food thermometer in the thickest part of the food, away from bone, fat, and gristle.
- Cover, stir, and rotate food in a microwave to cook the food evenly. Allow for standing time before using a food thermometer.

Chill

- Keep your refrigerator at 40°F or below and your freezer at 0°F or below.
- Thaw food in a refrigerator, microwave, or cold water. Cook food immediately after thawing in a microwave or cold water.
- Meat and poultry thawed in the refrigerator may be refrozen before or after cooking. If thawed in a microwave or cold water, cook before refreezing.
- Do not leave perishable food at room temperature for more than 2 hours (1 hour when the outside temperature is above 90°F).
- Only buy eggs that are refrigerated. Store eggs in the refrigerator in their original carton and use within 3–5 weeks.
- Only buy precut produce that is refrigerated or surrounded by ice. Keep precut produce refrigerated at home.

Glossary

Antibiotics: Drugs that treat certain types of infections.

Fetus: The stage of human development beyond 8 completed weeks after fertilization.

Listeriosis: A type of illness you can get from bacteria found in unpasteurized milk, hot dogs, luncheon meats, and smoked seafood.

Miscarriage: Loss of a pregnancy that is in the uterus.

Obstetrician–Gynecologist (Ob-Gyn): A doctor with special training and education in women's health.

Pasteurization: The process of heating certain foods to a specific temperature for a set period of time to kill harmful bacteria.

Preterm: Less than 37 weeks of pregnancy.

Stillbirth: Birth of a dead fetus.

If you have further questions, contact your obstetrician–gynecologist.

FAQ501: This information was designed as an educational aid to patients and sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. It is not intended as a statement of the standard of care, nor does it comprise all proper treatments or methods of care. It is not a substitute for a treating clinician's independent professional judgment. Please check for updates at www.acog.org to ensure accuracy.

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