

## Report to the Boards of Health

Jennifer Morse, MD, MPH, FAAFP, Medical Director

Mid-Michigan District Health Department, Wednesday, December 18, 2024  
Central Michigan District Health Department, Wednesday, December 18, 2024  
District Health Department 10, Friday, December 20, 2024



### ***Listeria***

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*Listeria monocytogenes* are bacteria found in moist environments like soil, water, and decaying vegetation. It is a very hardy germ and can grow under refrigeration and other food preservation measures. *Listeria* can be difficult to fully remove if it gets into a food processing facility. *Listeria* can survive on surfaces despite aggressive cleaning and sanitizing, and then if food comes in contact with surfaces contaminated with *Listeria*, the bacteria can grow rapidly on the food. *Listeria* is easily killed by heating food to a high enough temperature.



Source: [www.cdc.gov/listeria](http://www.cdc.gov/listeria)

There are some foods more likely to be contaminated with *Listeria*. These include:

- Raw (unpasteurized) milk and products made from it, including cheese, yogurt, and ice cream.
- Cheese. Even cheese made from pasteurized milk can get contaminated with *Listeria* during the cheese-making process. Soft cheeses are more likely to be contaminated with *Listeria* because of their high moisture, low salt content, and low acidity.
- Refrigerated pâté, meat spreads, and cold-smoked fish. “Shelf-stable” options are safer as they are heat-treated to kill any germs.
- Some produce, particularly sprouts, mushrooms, and melons. Sprouts and mushrooms need warm and humid conditions to grow which are ideal conditions for the growth of *Listeria* and other harmful germs. Melons have low acidity and can be kept in the refrigerator for a long time, both conditions that support the growth of *Listeria*.
- Products sold at deli counters, especially those sliced or prepared at the deli, such as sliced meat, cheese, and salads. Any *Listeria* contamination at the deli can spread easily among deli equipment, surfaces, hands, and food.
- Cold cuts, hot dogs, and fermented or dry sausages. Although cooking, fermenting, or drying kills germs, these meats can become contaminated later by touching surfaces in the production facility that are contaminated with *Listeria*. Reheating before eating at home will kill any germs that may be on these meats.

Listeriosis is the illness caused by *Listeria*. It is rare but can be very serious. It is most common in pregnant people, particularly those in their third trimester, their newborns, adults aged 65 or older, and people with weakened immune systems. It is rare for people in other groups to get seriously ill with listeriosis. Listeriosis can start a few hours or as long as two to three days after eating contaminated food. There are a range of symptoms for listeriosis and depending on the severity of the illness, it may last from days to several weeks. Mild symptoms may include a fever, muscle aches, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. If the more severe form of listeriosis develops, symptoms may include headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance, and convulsions.

*Listeria* infection can result in death. It is the third leading cause of death from a foodborne illness in the United States, after *Salmonella* and *Toxoplasma gondii*. On average roughly 1,600 people contract listeriosis each year, and approximately 260 die from the illness. Of the 9 worst foodborne illness outbreaks known in US history, 3 have been due to *Listeria*.

1. In 1985, a *Listeria* outbreak occurred in California linked to Mexican-style soft cheeses from Jalisco Products, Inc., sickening 142 people, 93 of which were pregnant women and their newborns. There were 48 deaths total: 20 stillbirths/miscarriages, 10 newborns, and 18 nonpregnant adults. This prompted the FDA to enforce stricter pasteurization standards for soft cheeses.
2. In 2011, an outbreak of *Listeria* traced to cantaloupes from Jensen Farms in Colorado led to 146 cases spanning 28 states. There were 33 deaths and one miscarriage. Jensen Farms recalled over 300,000 cantaloupes and *Listeria monocytogenes* was found in their packing facility. An assessment by the FDA and Colorado State identified many factors that were likely to contribute the contamination. Following the outbreak, many growers adopted stricter sanitation standards, and it highlighted the need for improved traceability in produce distribution.
3. This year, a *Listeria* outbreak linked to Boar's Head deli meats caused illness in 61 people from 19 states. All but one person needed hospitalization and 10 died. Over 7 million pounds deli meat was recalled. The facility involved had [record of numerous counts of major noncompliances over the prior two years with lack of corrective action](#).

Other recalls and outbreaks can be found at <https://www.foodsafety.gov/recalls-and-outbreaks>.

Listeriosis can be prevented by following the steps below:

- Wash hands for 20 seconds with soap and water before preparing and handling food.
- Keep your refrigerator sanitary. Clean up any spills or food left sitting on the shelves or walls of your refrigerator.
- Clean and sanitize any surfaces, such as tabletops, that food may touch.
- Consider using paper towels to clean kitchen surfaces. If you use cloth towels, wash them often in the hot cycle of a washing machine.
- Never drink unpasteurized ("raw") milk or eat cheeses, ice cream, or yogurt made with unpasteurized milk.
- Keep milk and milk products refrigerated at 40°F (4.4°C) or colder.
- The FoodKeeper App <https://www.foodsafety.gov/keep-food-safe/foodkeeper-app> can help you understand safe food and beverage storage. To prevent listeriosis:
  - Deli meat (store-sliced): use or freeze within 3-5 days.
  - Lunch/deli meat (factory-sealed): store unopened packages in the refrigerator for no longer than 2 weeks and use or freeze within 3-5 days after opened.
  - Store unopened hot dogs: store in the refrigerator for no longer than 2 weeks and use or freeze within 1 week after opened.
  - Melons: wash melons before cutting them. Eat cut melon immediately or refrigerate it. Store cut melon in refrigerator for no longer than one week. Any cut melon left out for more than 2 hours (1 hour if it's hotter than 90°F, such as a picnic or hot car) should not be eaten.

Additional recommendations for individuals at higher risk, including pregnant patients, older adults, and people with weakened immunity include:

- Use caution when eating soft cheese even if made with pasteurized milk, such as queso fresco, queso blanco, panela (queso panela), brie, Camembert, blue-veined, or feta.
- Do not eat raw or lightly cooked sprouts of any kind (including alfalfa, clover, radish, and mung bean sprouts). Cook sprouts thoroughly. Rinsing sprouts will not remove bacteria.

- Use caution when eating raw or lightly cooked mushrooms.
- Avoid eating hot dogs, lunch meats, cold cuts, other deli meats, or fermented or dry sausages, unless they are heated to an internal temperature of 165°F (74°C) or until steaming hot just before serving.
- Do not eat *refrigerated* pâté, meat spreads, or smoked seafood from a deli or meat counter or from the refrigerated section of a store. Foods that do not need refrigeration, like canned or shelf-stable products, are safe to eat. Refrigerate these foods after opening.
- It is especially important to not consume unpasteurized milk and milk products, including soft cheese, ice cream, and yogurt.

General food safety recommendations can be found at [www.FoodSafety.gov](http://www.FoodSafety.gov).

#### **Recommendations:**

1. Be aware of *Listeria* as a foodborne illness risk especially if you are at higher risk, such as being pregnant, are an older adult, or have a weakened immune system.
2. Follow the [4 steps to food safety, clean, separate, cook and chill](#), as well as the steps above to help prevent listeriosis.
3. Consider signing up to get alerted of food and other recalls at <https://www.recalls.gov/>.

#### **Sources**

- USDA Listeria Questions and Answers. <https://www.fsis.usda.gov/food-safety/foodborne-illness-and-disease/illnesses-and-pathogens/listeria>
- FDA. Listeria (Listeriosis). <https://www.fda.gov/food/foodborne-pathogens/listeria-listeriosis>
- Linnan, Michael J., et al. "Epidemic listeriosis associated with Mexican-style cheese." *New England Journal of Medicine* 319.13 (1988): 823-828.
- Letter to Under Secretary Esteban and Administrator Kiecker from members of US Congress and Senate regarding Boar's Head *Listeria* outbreak, September 30, 2024  
<https://www.cspinet.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/Letter%20to%20USDA%20on%20Recent%20Listeria%20Outbreak.pdf>