Listeriosis and Pregnancy: What is Your Risk?

Safe Food Handling for a Healthy Pregnancy

Information provided by:

Association of Women's Health, Obstetric and Neonatal Nurses (AWHONN)

International Food Information Council (IFIC) Foundation

U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)

When you're expecting, it's natural to be concerned about your health – and that of your unborn baby. Maintaining a healthful diet, drinking plenty of liquids, and taking prenatal vitamins are all important for the health of the expectant mother and her baby. Food safety is also very important. This information will help you make safe decisions when selecting and preparing food for yourself and/or your family.

Sometimes, what we eat can make us sick. Food contaminated by harmful bacteria can cause serious illness. One type of bacteria, *Listeria monocytogenes* (pronounced lis-TIR-ee-ya mon-o-si-TAH-gin-eez), can cause an illness called listeriosis. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 2,500 people become seriously ill with listeriosis each year in the United States. Of these, one in five die from the disease. Listeriosis can be particularly dangerous for pregnant women and their unborn babies. Foodborne illness caused by *Listeria* in pregnant women can result in premature delivery, miscarriage, fetal death, and severe illness or death of a newborn from the infection.

What is *Listeria*?

Listeria is a type of bacteria found everywhere – in soil and ground water and on plants. Animals and people can carry *Listeria* in their bodies without becoming sick. Despite being so widespread, most infections in humans result from eating contaminated foods.

Most people are not at increased risk for listeriosis. However, there are some people who are considered "at risk" because they are more susceptible to listeriosis. In addition to pregnant women and their unborn babies and newborns, other "at-risk" groups include older adults and people with weakened immune systems caused by cancer treatments, AIDS, diabetes, kidney disease, etc. By carefully following food safety precautions, persons at risk for listeriosis can substantially reduce their chances of becoming ill.

Why is listeriosis especially dangerous for me and my child?

Hormonal changes during pregnancy have an effect on the mother's immune system that lead to an increased susceptibility to listeriosis in the mother. According to the CDC, pregnant women are about 20 times more likely than other healthy adults to get listeriosis. In fact, about one-third of listeriosis cases happen during pregnancy. Listeriosis can be transmitted to the fetus through the placenta even if the mother is not showing signs of illness. This can lead to premature delivery, miscarriage, stillbirth, or serious health problems for her newborn.

Is *Listeria* transmitted from the mother to the baby through breast milk?

While there is a theoretical possibility that *Listeria monocytogenes* could be transmitted via mother's milk, this has never been proven.

How will I know if I have listeriosis?

Because the symptoms of listeriosis can take a few days or even weeks to appear and can be mild, you may not even know you have it. This is why it's very important to take appropriate food safety precautions during pregnancy.

In pregnant women, listeriosis may cause flu-like symptoms with the sudden onset of fever, chills, muscle aches, and sometimes diarrhea or upset stomach. The severity of the symptoms may vary. If the infection spreads to the nervous system, the symptoms may include headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance, or convulsions. Consult your doctor or healthcare provider if you have these symptoms. A blood test can be performed to find out if your symptoms are caused by listeriosis.

What is the treatment for listeriosis?

During pregnancy, antibiotics are given to treat listeriosis in the mother. In most cases, the antibiotics also prevent infection of the fetus or newborn. Antibiotics are also given to babies who are born with listeriosis.

What steps can I take to prevent listeriosis?

USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) provide the following advice for pregnant women and all "at-risk" consumers:

- **Do not eat** hot dogs, luncheon meats, or deli meats **unless they are reheated** until steaming hot.
- **Do not eat** soft cheeses such as feta, Brie, Camembert, blue-veined cheeses, and Mexican-style cheeses such as "queso blanco fresco." Hard cheeses, semi-soft cheeses such as mozzarella, pasteurized processed cheese slices and spreads, cream cheese, and cottage cheese can be safely consumed.
- **Do not eat** refrigerated pâté or meat spreads. Canned or shelf-stable pâté and meat spreads can be eaten.
- **Do not eat** refrigerated smoked seafood **unless** it is an ingredient in a **cooked** dish such as a casserole. Examples of refrigerated smoked seafood include salmon, trout, whitefish, cod, tuna, and mackerel which are

most often labeled as "nova-style," "lox," "kippered," "smoked," or "jerky." This fish is found in the refrigerated section or sold at deli counters of grocery stores and delicatessens. Canned fish such as salmon and tuna or shelf-stable smoked seafood may be safely eaten.

- **Do not drink** raw (unpasteurized) milk **or eat** foods that contain unpasteurized milk.

What can all consumers do to prevent listeriosis and keep their food safe?

Because *Listeria* can grow at refrigeration temperatures of 40°F or below, FSIS and FDA advise all consumers to:

- Use all perishable items that are precooked or ready-to-eat as soon as possible.
- Clean their refrigerators regularly.
- Use a refrigerator thermometer to make sure that the refrigerator always stays at 40° F or below.

What should I do if I've eaten a food that has been recalled because of *Listeria* contamination?

If you have eaten a contaminated product and do not have any symptoms, most experts believe you don't need any tests or treatment, even if you are pregnant. However, you should inform your physician or healthcare provider if you are pregnant and have eaten the contaminated product, and within 2 months experience flu-like symptoms.

It's important to learn how to protect yourself and your unborn baby from foodborne illnesses. Getting in the habit of eating a safe and nutritious diet not only benefits your baby, but will also give you peace of mind.

Remember – new information on food safety is constantly emerging. Recommendations and precautions are updated as scientists learn more about preventing foodborne illness. You need to be aware of and follow the most current information on food safety. Consult your healthcare provider if you have questions.

When preparing meals for yourself and/or your family, it is important to remember these four basic guidelines to help keep your food safe from harmful bacteria.

1. Clean

Wash hands and surfaces often

2. Separate

Don't allow cross-contamination between raw and cooked foods

3. Cook

Cook to proper temperatures – use a food thermometer

4. Chill

Refrigerate or freeze promptly

For more information:

Food Safety and Inspection Service
Meat and Poultry Hotline
1-800/535-4555
(in Washington, DC area 202/720-3333)
TTY: 1-800/256-7072
www.fsis.usda.gov

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention/Foodborne Illness Line (24 hr recorded information)
1-888/232-3228
www.cdc.gov/foodsafety

U.S. Food and Drug Administration
Center for Food Safety & Applied Nutrition 1-888-SAFEFOOD
www.cfsan.fda.gov

Gateway to Government Food Safety Information:
www.foodsafety.gov

Partnership for Food Safety Education
www.fightbac.org

International Food Information Council (IFIC) Foundation
http://ific.org

This brochure is developed in collaboration with the Association of Women's Health, Obstetric and Neonatal Nurses (AWHONN).

AWHONN Association of Women's Health, Obstetric and Neonatal Nurses

www.awhonn.org

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
www.dhhs.gov

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
www.cdc.gov

Food and Drug Administration
www.fda.gov

U.S. Department of Agriculture – Food Safety and Inspection Service
www.fsis.usda.gov

International Food Information Council (IFIC) Foundation
http://ific.org