

The National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) is reporting a very large outbreak of Listeriosis in South Africa. To date there have been over 550 cases reported, mostly in Gauteng. Here are some facts that you should know.

What is listeriosis?

Listeriosis is a serious infection caused by eating food contaminated with the bacterium called Listeria Monocytogenes. Although there are other types of Listeria, most cases of listeriosis are caused by Listeria Monocytogenes. Listeria is found in soil and water so vegetables can become contaminated from the soil or from manure used as fertilizer and even animals can carry the bacterium without appearing ill, and can then contaminate foods of animal origin, such as meats and dairy products.



What is the Incubation Period?

The incubation period (time between ingestion and the onset of symptoms) for Listeria ranges from three to 70 days and averages 21 days. This is important to note. So it does not always show up immediately

Who is at Risk?

Pregnant women, elderly – anyone over 65 years of age, anyone with a weak immune system due to other health complications. Newborns usually contract the diseases from their mothers in utero.



How is it Treated?

Listeriosis can be diagnosed by a blood test and is treated with antibiotics.



What are the Symptoms?

A person with listeriosis may develop fever, muscle aches, and sometimes nausea or diarrhea. If infection spreads to the nervous system, symptoms such as headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance, or convulsions can occur.

In children, the elderly or people with other health problems and a weak immune system, Listeria can invade the central nervous system, causing meningitis and/or encephalitis (brain infection). Infected pregnant women ordinarily experience only a mild, flu-like illness; however, infection during pregnancy can lead to miscarriage, infection of the newborn or even stillbirth.

What can I do to prevent getting the illness?

- Listeria can grow at refrigerated temperatures and so you must consume perishable and ready-to-eat foods as soon as possible and definitely by the use by date.
- Listeria is killed by heating so make sure you thoroughly cook raw food from animal sources, such as beef, pork, or poultry.
- Listeria occurs in soil, make sure you wash raw vegetables thoroughly before eating.
- Keep uncooked meats separate from vegetables and from cooked foods and ready-to-eat foods.
- Pasteurisation kills listeria so avoid unpasteurized (raw) milk or foods made from unpasteurized milk.
- Practice proper hygiene in your kitchen by washing hands, knives, and cutting boards after handling uncooked foods.

References: www.nicd.ac.za/assets/files/Listeriosis.pdf www.cdc.gov/listeria/index.html www.listeriablog.com/about/

Members of the public can contact the NICD Emergency Operations Centre during working hours at 011 386 2000. Health workers can call the NICD Hotline for Clinical Emergencies after hours at 082 883 9920



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What Foods could be at risk of Listeria?

Listeria has been found in a variety of raw foods, such as uncooked meats and unpasteurized (raw) milk or foods made from unpasteurized milk. Listeria is killed by pasteurization and cooking; however, in certain ready-to-eat foods, like hot dogs and cold cuts from the deli counter, contamination may occur after cooking but before packaging. The following foods are being considered by The National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) Ref: <http://www.nicd.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Listeria-Case-Investigation-Form.docx>

Eggs	Fruit	Unpasteurised Milk	Root Vegetables
Cured/smoked seafood	Chicken/poultry	Cold meat (ham/polony)	Raw vegetable
Ready-to-eat meals	Ready-to-eat-salads	Sandwich spreads/Dips	Mayonnaise
Hard cheeses	Soft cheeses (cream cheese)	Cream/Ice Cream	Yoghurt/Buttermilk/Amasi
Processed meat (biltong, sausage)		Meat spreads (Pate, paste, brawn)	

Foods most often implicated in outbreaks around the world include

Ready-to-eat deli meats and hot dogs; refrigerated pâtés or meat spreads; unpasteurized (raw) milk and dairy products; soft cheese made with unpasteurized milk, such as queso fresco, Feta, Brie, Camembert; refrigerated smoked seafood; raw sprouts Ref: <https://www.foodsafety.gov/poisoning/causes/bacteriaviruses/listeria/index.html>

The pathogen has been isolated from a very wide range of processed foods including pâtés, milk, soft cheeses, ice cream, ready-to-eat cooked and fermented meats, smoked and lightly processed fish products and other seafood. Celery, sprouts, cantaloupe have also been identified.

Ref: <http://www.foodsafetywatch.org/factsheets/listeria/> and <https://www.cdc.gov/listeria/prevention.html>