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Listeriosis and Pregnancy

Listeria monocytogenes is a bacterium which can contaminate foods and cause an illness called listeriosis. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates about 2500 Americans contract listeriosis each year and one in five of these people die from the illness. If a pregnant woman becomes ill with listeriosis, complications can also include premature delivery, miscarriage, fetal death, or severe illness or death of the newborn infant. Since pregnant women have a changed immune system, they are 20 times more likely to contract listeriosis. Moreover, the infection can be spread to the fetus through the placenta without the pregnant mother showing signs of illness. Spread through breast milk has not been demonstrated.

Listeria monocytogenes is a common bacterium and can be found in the soil, ground water, and on plants. It can reside in animals and people without their being sick so they are carriers. Most commonly, new infections result from eating contaminated foods.

The signs and symptoms of listeriosis can vary from none to severe illness, usually taking days to weeks to develop. Symptoms again may vary from none to a flu-like illness, fever, chills, muscle ache, joint pain, diarrhea, nausea, headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance, or seizures. Since the infection can be so subtle, the best treatment is to try to avoid infection by taking appropriate precautions.

Common precautions include:

1. Do not eat hot dogs, luncheon meats, or deli meats unless they are reheated till steaming hot.
2. Do not eat soft cheeses such as "queso blanco fresco". Hard cheeses and semi-soft cheeses such as mozzarella pasteurized processed cheese slices and spreads, cream cheese, and cottage cheese are fine.
3. Do not eat refrigerated pate or meat spreads. Canned or shelf-stable pate and meat spreads are allowed.
4. 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 often labeled as "nova-style," "lox," "kippered," "smoked," or "jerky." This fish is found in the refrigerated or deli sections of grocery stores or delicatessens. Canned fish such as salmon and tuna or shelf-stable smoked seafood may be safely eaten.
5. Do not drink raw (unpasteurized) milk or eat foods that contain unpasteurized milk.

If an infection should occur during pregnancy, the mother is given antibiotics. Infected babies are also given antibiotics. If you eat contaminated food products and have no symptoms, most experts do not feel any tests or treatment are required. However, if any symptoms should occur within two months of this exposure, a health care provider should be immediately notified.

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Source: Food and Drug Administration