

FOOD SAFETY INFORMATION

Manufacturers of food products
Retailers of food products
General Public

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: Warning on the potential risk of *Listeria monocytogenes* infection by consuming contaminated food

1. OVERVIEW

Foodborne Listeriosis is one of the most serious and severe foodborne diseases caused by the bacteria *Listeria monocytogenes*. It is a relatively rare disease with 0.1 to 10 cases per 1 million people per year depending on the countries and regions of the world. Although the number of cases of listeriosis is small, the high rate of death associated with this infection makes it a significant public health concern.

Unlike many other common foodborne diseases causing bacteria, *L. monocytogenes* can survive and multiply at low temperatures usually found in refrigerators. Eating food contaminated with high numbers of *L. monocytogenes* is the main route of infection. Humans are infected when they consume foods that harbor the bacteria. Infection can also be transmitted between humans, notably from pregnant women to unborn babies.

Immunosuppressed individuals and pregnant women are at high risk of a serious case of listeriosis. Listeriosis can lead to septicemia or meningitis. Pregnant women are 10 times more likely to be infected with listeria than the general population.

Food most often associated with Listeriosis

- Foods with a long shelf-life under refrigeration: (*L. monocytogenes* can grow to significant numbers in food at refrigeration temperatures when given sufficient time);
- Foods that are consumed without further treatment, such as cooking, which would otherwise kill *L. monocytogenes*.

In past outbreaks, foods involved include ready-to-eat meat products, such as frankfurters, meat spread (pate), smoked salmon and fermented raw meat sausages, dairy products (including soft cheeses, unpasteurized milk, and ice cream), prepared salads (including coleslaw, and bean sprouts) as well as fresh vegetables and fruits.

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2. TYPES OF LISTERIOSIS AND THEIR SYMPTOMS

There are two main types of listeriosis: a **non-invasive** form and an **invasive** form:

Non-invasive listeriosis (febrile listerial gastroenteritis) is a mild form of the disease affecting mainly otherwise healthy people. Symptoms include diarrhea, fever, headache, and myalgia (muscle pain). Outbreaks of this disease have generally involved the ingestion of foods containing high doses of *L. monocytogenes*.

Invasive listeriosis is a more severe form of the disease and affects certain high-risk groups of the population. These include pregnant women, patients undergoing treatment for cancer, AIDS and organ transplants, elderly people, and infants. This form of disease is characterized by severe symptoms and a high mortality rate (20%-30%). The symptoms include fever, myalgia (muscle pain), septicemia and meningitis. The incubation period is usually one to two weeks but can vary between a few days and up to 90 days.

3. PREVENTION

You can keep food safe from *Listeria monocytogenes* by:

_Following good food hygiene practices, such as washing and drying hands thoroughly before and after handling and preparing food,

_Eating freshly-cooked or freshly-prepared foods and wash fruits and vegetables very well before eating,

_Cooking food thoroughly to kill any listeria bacteria,

_Refrigerating leftovers immediately (cool hot foods for 30 minutes before refrigerating) and using them within two days. (Leftovers should be reheated to steaming hot – at least 75° C before eating).

Non-recommended food for people at risk:

_Uncooked, smoked or ready-to-eat fish or seafood, including oysters, smoked ready-to-eat fish, sashimi or sushi,

_Pâté, hummus-based dips and spreads, and all other chilled pre-cooked meat products including chicken, and fermented or dried sausages such as salami,

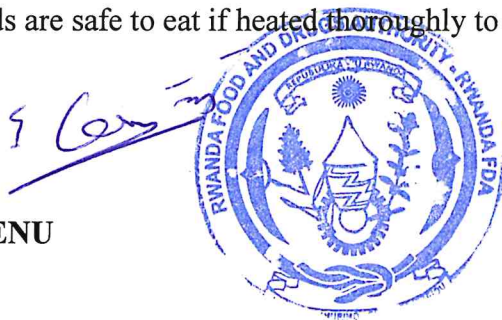
_Pre-prepared or stored salads (including fruit salads) and coleslaws raw (unpasteurized),

_Milk, soft-serve ice creams and any food that contains unpasteurized milk,

_Soft, semi-soft, or surface-ripened soft cheese (such as brie, camembert, feta, ricotta, and Roquefort).

Note that these foods are safe to eat if heated thoroughly to steaming hot (at least 75° C).

Sincerely,



Dr. Emile BIENVENU
Director General

REFERENCES

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