

LISTERIOSIS: Notes about the Disease

Listeria monocytogenes is a ubiquitous soil bacterium that infects and colonizes livestock and finds its way into various foods, particularly unpasteurized dairy products, processed and raw meats, and raw vegetables. It has the ability to multiply at temperatures as low as 37° and as high as 150° F; it can survive freezing as well. Since the mid-1980s, the Food and Drug Administration has been monitoring both domestic and imported cheeses for *Listeria*, and recalls of these products are not rare events.

The public health importance of listeriosis stems from the fact that, although most healthy persons can consume food contaminated with small numbers of *L. monocytogenes* organisms with impunity, certain high-risk groups—the very young, the elderly, and those with impaired immune systems—may become seriously ill. Pregnant women are especially at risk because, even though the woman herself may only experience mild symptoms, listeriosis during pregnancy may result in stillbirths or serious neonatal infections. An outbreak traced to noncommercial Mexican-style soft cheese made from raw milk and sold door-to-door and in Hispanic markets in Winston-Salem in 2000 resulted in five stillbirths, three premature deliveries, and three infected newborns among the 11 infected pregnant women.¹

An estimated 2,500 cases of serious listeriosis with a 20% case-fatality ratio occur in the United States annually. Education of the public in proper food handling, with special emphasis on avoidance of unpasteurized milk or milk products, is the *sine quo non* of listeriosis prevention.

1. PDM MacDonald, et al., "Outbreak of Listeriosis Among Mexican Immigrants as a Result of Consumption of Illicitly Produced Mexican-Style Cheese," *Clin Infect Dis* 40 (2005): 677-82, www.journals.uchicago.edu/CID/journal/issues/v40n5/34554/34554.web.pdf.