

Patient information: Listeria (The Basics)

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What is Listeria? — Listeria is a type of bacteria that can cause fever, stomach upset, and other symptoms. People can get it from eating certain foods.

Listeria can be mild or severe. It is not usually serious in healthy adults. But it can be more dangerous in pregnant women than in people who are not pregnant. Plus, a pregnant woman can pass Listeria to her unborn baby. The unborn baby can get very sick and even die.

Certain other people are also at risk of getting very sick from Listeria. They include:

- Newborn babies
- Older people
- People who have AIDS, cancer, diabetes, or another serious medical condition
- People who had an organ transplant or stem cell transplant
- People who take medicines that make it hard for the body to fight off infections

These people are more likely to get Listeria infections in the bloodstream or brain.

What are the symptoms of Listeria infection? — The symptoms are different depending on which part of the body is affected.

People with Listeria infection in the **brain and spinal cord** can have:

- Fever
- Headache
- Nausea and vomiting
- Stiff neck
- Confusion or trouble thinking
- Weak muscles on one side of the body, trouble walking, or shaky hands
- Seizures – Seizures are waves of abnormal electrical activity in the brain. They can make people pass out or move or behave strangely.

People with Listeria infection in the **bloodstream** can have:

- Fever
- Chills
- Dizziness
- Low blood pressure
- Fast heart rate
- Pain in joints and muscles

People with Listeria infection in the **digestive system** ([figure 1](#)) can have:

- Fever
- Watery diarrhea
- Nausea and vomiting
- Headache
- Pain in joints and muscles

Should I see a doctor or nurse? — Call a doctor or nurse if you have any of the symptoms listed above and you are pregnant, older, have a serious medical condition, or take medicines that weaken the immune system.

Call a doctor or nurse if your newborn baby:

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- Gets sick with a fever or any of the other symptoms listed above
- Acts differently from normal, such as feeding less than usual, breathing faster than usual, or looking sleepier than usual

Is there a test for Listeria? — Yes, there are a few different tests. Which ones you need will depend on your symptoms, whether you are pregnant, and if you have other medical conditions. Tests include:

- Blood tests
- A lumbar puncture (sometimes called a “spinal tap”) – During this procedure, a doctor puts a thin needle into your lower back and takes out a small amount of spinal fluid. Spinal fluid is the fluid around the brain and spinal cord. He or she will do tests on the fluid to look for Listeria.
- Tests on a sample of your bowel movement (if you could have Listeria that affects the digestive system)
- Imaging tests of the brain – These tests create pictures of the inside of the body. They can include an MRI or CT scan.

How is Listeria treated? — Pregnant women, newborn babies, and people with serious Listeria infections are treated with medicines called antibiotics. These are usually given through a thin tube that goes into a vein called an “IV.” People who are very sick might need treatment in the hospital.

Healthy adults with Listeria that affects the digestive system don’t usually need treatment. The infection usually goes away on its own in about 2 days.

Can Listeria be prevented? — You can reduce your chances of getting Listeria by paying attention to food safety. Tips include:

- Avoid unpasteurized milk and cheese or foods made with them
- Wash fruits and vegetables well before eating them
- Keep the refrigerator colder than 40°F (4.4°C) and the freezer below 0°F (-18°C)
- Cook meat and seafood until well done
- Cook eggs until the yolk is firm
- Wash hands, knives, and cutting boards after they touch raw food

Pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems should avoid certain foods, including:

- Raw milk
- Soft cheeses (including Mexican-style cheeses like queso blanco)
- Hot dogs
- Deli meats
- Pâtés
- Smoked seafood (such as lox)

You should also talk with your doctor or nurse about which foods to avoid.

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