Fact Sheet: Listeriosis

What is Listeriosis?
Listeriosis is an infection caused by eating food contaminated with the bacterium Listeria monocytogenes. The bacteria are found in soil and water. Animals can carry the bacteria without appearing ill and can then contaminate meat and dairy products. Processed foods such as soft cheeses (i.e., feta, Brie, Camembert, blue-veined, and Mexican-style cheese) and deli meats can become contaminated after processing. Listeria can multiply in refrigerated foods. The disease primarily affects older adults, pregnant women, infants, immunosuppressed persons, and those with chronic disease.

What are the symptoms?
- Fever
- Muscle aches
- Nausea and/or vomiting
- Diarrhea

More serious symptoms that may occur and require prompt medical attention:
- Headache
- Stiff neck
- Confusion
- Loss of balance
- Convulsions

Symptoms usually occur about 2-3 weeks after exposure; however, cases have occurred as long as 70 days after exposure.

How is it treated?
- Listeriosis is treated with antibiotics.
- Call your health care provider if you think you have been exposed to food contaminated with listeria.
- An antibiotic may be prescribed for treatment.
- Take all medicines as prescribed even if you start to feel better.
- When infection occurs during pregnancy, antibiotics are given to prevent infection of the fetus or newborn. Infected babies receive the same antibiotics as adults.

Even with prompt treatment, a severe infection can result in death. The elderly, persons with other medical problems, fetuses, and newborns are at high risk.

How is it prevented?
- Cook all meat products to the safe minimum cooking temperature.
- Do not drink unpasteurized or “raw” milk.
- Do not eat soft cheeses (such as feta, queso blanco, etc.) unless the label says “made with pasteurized milk”.
- Wash all fruits and vegetables thoroughly (scrub melons and cucumbers) with running water and keep them separate from uncooked meats.
- Wash knives and cutting boards after handling or preparing uncooked food.

For specific information on Listeriosis call: USDA Consumers Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-888-674-6854.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information contact your health care provider or visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at www.cdc.gov.