

STATE OF COLORADO

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Dedicated to protecting and improving the health and environment of the people of Colorado

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Colorado Department
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Frequently Asked Questions About the Listeria Outbreak Connected to Cantaloupe Last Updated Sept. 29, 2011

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE DISEASE

What is Listeria?

Listeria is a bacterium that is commonly found in soil, water, and the environment. Animals can also carry the bacterium in their gastrointestinal tracts. Listeria can potentially contaminate food. In the United States, it is estimated that 1600 people become seriously ill with Listeria infection each year. Of these, 260 die.

Who is at risk for Listeria infection?

People at risk for Listeria infection include:

- Older adults (ages 60 and older),
- Pregnant women,
- Newborns
- Adults with weakened immune systems due to transplants or certain medications, therapies or diseases (like cancer, diabetes, AIDS, alcoholism, liver disease, or kidney disease).

Rarely, people without these risk factors can also be affected. Healthy children and adults occasionally get infected with Listeria, but they rarely become seriously ill.

How does a person become ill with Listeria?

At-risk people (older adults, pregnant women, adults with weakened immune systems) generally become ill with Listeria by consuming foods contaminated by the bacteria. If a pregnant woman becomes ill, the infection can be passed on to her unborn child. Healthy people may consume contaminated foods without becoming ill.

What is the incubation period (the time from ingestion of the bacteria to the time symptoms appear) for Listeria?

Listeria can have a variable incubation period, ranging from three to 70 days. The average incubation period is three weeks.

What are the symptoms of Listeria infection?

Listeria infection can cause serious illness. People infected with Listeria bacteria usually have fever and muscle aches, often preceded by diarrhea or other gastrointestinal symptoms. Other symptoms can include headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance, and convulsions. Listeria bacteria can spread beyond the gastrointestinal tract into the blood and other body systems. Pregnant women typically experience only a mild, flu-like illness; however, infections during pregnancy can lead to miscarriage, stillbirth, premature delivery, or life-threatening infection of the newborn.

Can Listeria infection be treated?

Antibiotics given promptly can cure the illness and prevent infection of the fetus in pregnant women. Even with prompt treatment, some *Listeria* infections result in death. This is particularly likely in older adults and in people with other serious medical problems.

What do I do if I think I am infected with Listeria?

If you have symptoms, you should immediately consult with a health care provider.

What types of foods can be contaminated with Listeria?

A wide variety of foods can potentially be contaminated with Listeria, including meats, fish, dairy products, fruits, and vegetables. The riskiest foods include soft cheeses, cheese and other dairy products made with unpasteurized or raw milk, processed meats such as hot dogs and deli meat, and smoked seafood. Unlike most bacteria, Listeria can grow and multiply in some foods at refrigeration temperatures.

Does cooking kill Listeria?

Listeria is killed by cooking and pasteurization. It is possible for some ready-to-eat foods, like hot dogs and deli meats, to become contaminated after processing, so people at risk for Listeria infection (older adults, pregnant women, adults with weakened immune systems) should cook these products prior to consuming.

What are the best ways to prevent Listeria infection?

People at risk (older adults, pregnant women, adults with weakened immune systems) can prevent infection by avoiding high-risk foods and by handling food properly.

High risk foods include:

- Raw (unpasteurized) milk and products made with raw (unpasteurized) milk, especially soft cheeses like Mexican-style queso fresco.
- Soft cheeses such as feta, queso blanco, queso fresco, brie, Camembert, blue-veined, or panela (queso panela)
- Hot dogs, luncheon meats, cold cuts, other deli meats, fermented or dry sausages – unless these meats are heated to 165 degrees F or steaming hot immediately prior to eating.

- Refrigerated pâté or meat spreads from the deli counter
- Smoked seafood (unless it is contained in a cooked dish like a casserole)

Proper food handling measures include:

- Thoroughly cook all meat and poultry.
- Heat hot dogs, deli meats, and cold cuts until they are 165 degrees F or steaming hot just before serving.
- Be sure your refrigerator is at or below 40 degrees F, and your freezer is at 0 degrees F by using a refrigerator thermometer.
- Rinse fruits and vegetables under running water before eating. Dry the fruits and vegetables with a clean cloth or paper towel before cutting them up.
- Keep uncooked meats and poultry separate from vegetables and from cooked foods and ready-to-eat foods.
- Wash hands, knives, countertops, and cutting boards after handling and preparing uncooked foods or hot dogs, luncheon meats, or deli meats.
- Don't eat perishable refrigerated foods after the "use-by" date.
- For hot dogs, store opened packages no longer than 1 week; store unopened packages no longer than 2 weeks.
- For deli meat, store factory-sealed, unopened packages no longer than 2 weeks; store opened packages and meat sliced at a local deli no longer than 3 to 5 days in the refrigerator.
- Avoid getting drippings from hot dog and lunch meat packages on other foods, on refrigerator shelves/drawers, utensils, counters, and other surfaces where you prepare food.
- Clean the inside walls and shelves of your refrigerator with hot water and liquid soap, then rinse with water.
- Consume leftover foods as soon as possible, and definitely within 3 to 4 days.

OUTBREAK-SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

Can you give me information about the current outbreak?

State and local health departments in Colorado and several other states are investigating an outbreak of *Listeria* infections. The investigation is being coordinated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is also involved in the investigation. Investigation findings have indicated that cantaloupe produced by Jensen Farms in Holly, CO is the source of the *Listeria* bacteria causing the outbreak.

How many cases are there?

As of Thursday, Sept. 29, 2011, there have been 17 ill people in Colorado infected with strains of *Listeria* associated with the outbreak. Three people have died. A total of 72 confirmed illnesses caused by this outbreak have been reported from 18 states including Colorado. There have been several other patients in Colorado with *Listeria* since August 1 who are either not believed to be part of the outbreak based on laboratory test results or because laboratory test results are still pending.

In Colorado, ill people associated with the outbreak have resided in Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Denver, Douglas, El Paso, Larimer, Montezuma, and Weld counties. These people range in age from the 30s to the 90s, with an average age of 75 years. The majority of patients are female.

What food item is causing the outbreak?

Investigation findings have indicated that cantaloupe produced by Jensen Farms in Holly, CO is the source of *Listeria* causing the outbreak. Jensen Farms cantaloupe was marketed as “Rocky Ford” cantaloupe and may or may not have a sticker identifying them as Jensen Farms cantaloupes. Individuals who are high risk for listeriosis (older adults, pregnant women, adults with weakened immune systems) should not eat cantaloupe if they know it’s from Jensen Farms or if they don’t know where the cantaloupe they purchased is from. Other consumers not at high risk for *Listeria* infection should also avoid eating Rocky Ford cantaloupe from Jensen Farms to reduce their risk of *Listeria* infection.

Do you know where the implicated cantaloupe came from?

Health officials have confirmed a direct link between human cases in the *Listeria* outbreak and cantaloupe labeled as “Rocky Ford” from Jensen Farms in Holly, Colorado.

If I wash the cantaloupe, can I then eat it?

It is not clear if washing cantaloupe would remove all *Listeria* that could potentially be on the surface. It is also possible that *Listeria* may be on the inside of the cantaloupe. The state of Colorado has advised Colorado residents who are at high risk for *Listeria* infection (older adults, pregnant women, adults with weakened immune systems) to avoid eating cantaloupes from Jensen farms, even if the cantaloupe is washed.

I currently have cantaloupe in my home. What should I do with it?

Public health officials advise that people who are at high risk for *Listeria* infection (older adults, pregnant women, adults with weakened immune systems) avoid eating cantaloupes produced by Jensen Farms and dispose of any Jensen Farms cantaloupe in their possession. Officials also recommend that other consumers not at high risk for *Listeria* infection avoid eating Rocky Ford cantaloupe from Jensen Farms to reduce their risk of *Listeria* infection. If you are unsure where your cantaloupe is from, avoid eating it and discard it. If the cantaloupe was stored in the refrigerator or on the counter, these areas should be washed with warm soapy water, and then rinsed with clean water.

I’ve recently eaten cantaloupe. What should I do?

The risk of developing *Listeria* infection is very small. If you do not have any symptoms, no tests or treatment are recommended, even if you are in a high-risk group (older adults, pregnant women, adults with weakened immune systems).

If you are in a high risk group, have eaten cantaloupe within the past two months, and are ill with fever or other symptoms of *Listeria* infection, you should contact your physician immediately and inform him or her that you consumed cantaloupe, which may be contaminated with *Listeria*.

I think I might be sick from eating cantaloupe. What should I do?

If you believe you have Listeria symptoms, you should immediately consult with a health care provider.