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Listeria Infection In Humans ("Listeriosis")

What is listeriosis?
Listeriosis is an infection caused by a germ called *Listeria monocytogenes*. In healthy people, it usually causes a mild flu-like illness that goes away without any treatment. In the very young or elderly, however, and in people with a weakened immune system it can cause severe disease that requires hospitalisation.

What are the symptoms of listeriosis?
Severe infection usually manifests as blood poisoning (septicaemia) or infection around the brain (meningitis). In newborn babies Listeria can, in addition, cause lung infection (pneumonia).

How do you get listeriosis?
Infection usually occurs after eating food contaminated with the Listeria bacterium. Foods most likely to be contaminated include ready-to-eat refrigerated meals and processed foods. For example, pre-prepared ready-to-eat cooked and chilled meals, soft cheeses, cold meats, pâtés and smoked fish. It is impossible to tell from the appearance, taste or smell whether the food is contaminated with Listeria. Listeria can also be found in raw food, soil, vegetation and sewage.

How is listeriosis diagnosed?
Listeriosis can be diagnosed by performing special tests to grow the Listeria bacterium in the laboratory. The most important ones are cultures of blood, and culture of lumbar puncture fluid (the fluid around the brain and spinal cord).

What is the treatment for listeriosis?
Healthy adults and children with mild illness only need treatment of the symptoms. People with severe symptoms need to be treated with antibiotics in hospital.

Should healthy people have tests for Listeria?
Health authorities, including the South African National Institute for Communicable Diseases, do not recommend so-called "routine screening tests" for people who are well. Laboratories therefore don't offer these investigations.

What about pregnant women?
Listeria in pregnancy usually causes a mild illness in the mother. However, it can affect the baby during pregnancy, or the baby may become infected during birth.

If you are pregnant and develop symptoms that could be associated with listeriosis, e.g. fever or diarrhoea, you should contact your obstetrician or other healthcare provider straight away. Your medical doctor will decide whether any laboratory tests may be required.

How can you avoid getting listeriosis?
- Keep foods for as short a time as possible and follow storage instructions, including 'use by' and 'eat by dates.
- Cook food thoroughly, ensuring that it is cooked through to the middle.
- Keep cooked food away from raw food.
- Wash salads, fruit and raw vegetables thoroughly before eating.
- Wash hands, knives and cutting boards after handling uncooked food.
- When heating food in a microwave oven, follow heating and standing times recommended by the manufacturer.
- Throw away left-over reheated food. Cooked food which is not eaten immediately should be cooled as rapidly as possible and then stored in the refrigerator

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