

## Listeria – Guidance for Consumers

### **What is it?**

Listeria is a name given to a group of bacteria. One of these, called *Listeria monocytogenes*, can cause illness when food contaminated with the bacteria is eaten.

### **Where is it found?**

Listeria is found naturally in the environment, and also in cattle, sheep and silage. It has also been found in unpasteurised milk products, including soft cheeses such as camembert and brie, and meat-based pate. Recent work has shown it can be found in freshly sliced cooked meats.

### **What does it do?**

The illness caused by Listeria is called listeriosis. It caused a range of symptoms from mild 'flu-like' illness to blood poisoning and inflammation of the lining of the brain. It can cause abortion in pregnant women. Listeriosis is rare, but it can be a life threatening disease.

The highest risk groups are the elderly and the immunocompromised, such as those recovering from recent illness or being treated for cancer, pregnant women, and very young babies.

### **Why has this guidance been issued?**

Public Protection Officers from Blackpool Council's Food Control Group, working in conjunction with colleagues in the Health Protection Agency, carried out a survey to check the microbiological safety of freshly sliced cooked meats.

### **What were the results?**

Forty two Local Authorities from across the North West submitted 1,127 samples of freshly sliced cooked meats. *Listeria monocytogenes* was found in 82 samples on the day of purchase, of which 5 were classed as unsatisfactory and potentially hazardous, suggesting poor handling or cleaning practices during production.

After 48 hours storage at 6°C the food samples were tested again. This time, 31 of the 82 infected samples had *Listeria monocytogenes* present at a level that posed a serious risk to the health of vulnerable people.

### **Why is this a problem?**

*Listeria monocytogenes* has been found at potentially harmful levels in around 2.8% of the samples tested after 2 days storage at 6°C. An average domestic refrigerator often operates at a higher temperature, which means that the bacteria are likely to grow more quickly.

Without a 'Use By Date', it is not clear how long consumers can keep the sliced cooked meat before it should be disposed of.

### **What should I do?**

It is recommended that any freshly sliced cooked meats you buy are eaten on the day of purchase. They should certainly be eaten within 2 days of purchase.

On a general note, good hygiene practices to follow in your home are:

When you buy ready-to-eat foods like sliced cooked meats, you should try to get them into your refrigerator as quickly as possible.

You should try to keep your refrigerator operating at or below 5°C. This makes it harder for bacteria to grow on the foods kept in your refrigerator. A fridge thermometer should be used regularly to check the temperature.

Ready-to-eat foods should be kept separately in the coolest zone of the refrigerator, usually around the middle shelves. Raw foods should be kept at the bottom of your refrigerator because this stops raw meat juices, which can carry harmful bacteria, dripping onto ready-to-eat foods. When storing and handling ready-to-eat foods it is important that they are kept separate from raw foods like eggs, raw chicken and raw meats. This is because the outside shells and raw meats often carry food poisoning bacteria.

If raw foods touch ready-to-eat food, bacteria from the raw food is transferred. Given time, they can grow on the ready-to-eat food to a level that can make you ill.

Work tops and food contact surfaces like chopping boards should be cleaned with disinfectant. These chemicals kill most bacteria. Remember that your hands carry harmful bacteria from raw foods and whatever you touch can be contaminated. This is why it is important to wash hands, utensils and food contact surfaces properly. Don't forget refrigerator handles and sink taps, which should also be cleaned regularly.

Other sliced meats, for example those bought in a sealed pack, will have a 'Use By' date on them. While this survey did not examine these kinds of meats, it is sensible to follow the 'Use By' date printed on the pack. You should also remember that once the pack has been opened, the 'Use By' date no longer applies and you should eat the meat within 2 days of opening the pack.

Retailers are being contacted to encourage them to apply an appropriate shelf life indication to the product at the point of sale.

A larger scale survey is being considered to investigate the scale of the problem. It is not thought to be limited to the North West, and there has been an increase in cases of listeriosis across the country, mostly affecting the elderly.

#### **Where can I get further information?**

More information about Listeria is available on the Health Protection Agency Website:  
[www.hpa.org.uk/infections/topics\\_az/listeria/menu/htm](http://www.hpa.org.uk/infections/topics_az/listeria/menu/htm)

Anyone with concerns about their health should contact NHS direct on 0845 4647 or visit the website  
[www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk) or consult your family doctor.

Information about hygiene standards can be obtained by contacting Blackpool Council's Food Control Group on 01253 478327.