

Listeria – Guidance for Retailers

What is it?

Listeria is the name given to a group of bacteria. One of these, called *Listeria monocytogenes*, can cause illness when food contaminated with this 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 causes 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 pregnant women, very young babies, the elderly and the immunocompromised, such as those recovering from recent illness or being treated for cancer.

Why has this guidance been issued?

Public Protection Officers from Blackpool Councils' Food Control Group working 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?

42 Local Authorities across the North West submitted 1,127 samples of freshly sliced cooked meats. Listeria species were found in 176 samples on the day of purchase and 82 were *Listeria monocytogenes*. 5 of these were classed as unacceptable and potentially hazardous, suggesting poor hygiene practices during production or retail.

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

Why is this 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 usually operates at a higher temperature, which means the bacteria are likely to grow more quickly.

Without a 'Use-By' date, it is not clear how long consumers have to eat the food before it should be disposed of.

What should I do?

Make sure you provide customers with a clear 'Use-By' date. The latest advice is that customers should be advised to eat freshly sliced cooked meats on the day of purchase and certainly within 2 days.

Make sure you know the difference between a disinfectant (kills most bacteria), a detergent (removes grease and food debris without killing bacteria) and a sanitizer (combined detergent and disinfectant properties) and use them properly. Disinfect food contact surfaces and equipment such as slicer blades, knives, chopping boards and display surfaces, along with hand contact surfaces such as refrigerator handles, utensils and taps, regularly and thoroughly. If you dilute your own cleaning chemicals, make sure you follow the manufacturer's instructions – too strong can be as bad as too weak.

Ensure your stock rotation is accurate, using food strictly in date order and taking care that any sliced meats are sold the day they are sliced.

Ensure all raw meat and associated activities are properly separated from cooked meats and other ready-to-eat foods, to control cross-contamination.

Make sure your display units are calibrated and are operating at or below 8°C, and preferably at around 5°C. Check the temperature across the display bed to see where the lowest temperature area is, and place ready-to-eat foods here (taking care not to cross contaminate with any raw foods).

Check your processes and distribution chain. Keep ready-to-eat products like cooked meats cold, 5°C or below.

If you produce cooked meats with a shelf life of more than 5 days, implement an environmental sampling plan for Listeria with corrective actions for positive results. You should contact this department for further advice if this may affect you.

If you have a documented HACCP, make sure this is up to date. If you are using the Safer Food Better business pack, make sure the pack is up to date and accurately reflects your practices. For advice and guidance, contact this office.

What else is happening?

Information is being provided to the public to provide advice on appropriate storage times and temperatures. They are being urged to eat any freshly sliced cooked meats on the day of purchase or the next day, to reduce the opportunity for Listeria to grow to potentially dangerous levels in their refrigerators.

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, as there has been an increase in cases of listeriosis across the country.

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

Anyone with concerns about their health should contact NHS direct on 0845 4647 or visit the website
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.