

**L**isteria is the foodborne problem most closely associated with processed foods, unlike such human-borne pathogens as Hepatitis A. *Listeria monocytogenes* are the causative agent of the disease listeriosis, which can be particularly devastating to children, the elderly, pregnant women and their fetuses, and the immune-compromised, who may develop meningitis or other brain infections as a result. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that every year in the U.S., approximately 2,500 cases of listeriosis are known to occur, although it is likely that many more cases go unrecognized. About 500 deaths a year are attributed to the illness.

**Listeria monocytogenes is found in soil and water.**

Vegetables can become contaminated from the soil or from manure used as fertilizer. Animals can carry the bacterium without appearing ill and can contaminate foods of animal origin such as meats and dairy products. The bacterium has been found in a variety of raw foods, such as uncooked meats and vegetables, as well as in processed foods that become contaminated after processing, such as soft cheeses and cold cuts. Unpasteurized (raw) milk or foods made from unpasteurized milk may contain the bacterium.

**Listeria is killed by pasteurization and cooking;** however, in certain ready-to-eat foods such as hot dogs and deli meats, re-contamination may occur after cooking but before packaging.

## FACTS

## IMPLICATIONS

Soft cheeses such as feta, Brie and Camembert, blue-veined and Mexican-style cheeses have been implicated in outbreaks	High-risk groups (see above) should avoid these foods
Ready-to-eat foods such as hot dogs and processed meats are frequent culprits	Listeria can be killed through pasteurization and/or thorough cooking
Undercooked chicken has been associated with listeriosis	Always cook chicken to an internal temperature of 165° F. in the thickest section (i.e., center of the breast)
Certain strains of the bacteria can live for a more than a year in processing environments	The food industry is experimenting with a variety of processes designed to definitively eradicate Listeria, including the addition of chemical and biological inhibitors, and the use of high-pressure processing techniques
Unlike most bacteria, which grow poorly when temperatures fall below 40° F., Listeria grows best at 0° F. to 50° F., which is the range used for refrigerated food	Proper refrigeration is not enough; cook foods thoroughly. Ready-to-eat items such as hot dogs should be served steaming hot
Listeria is found in soil and water, where it can enter raw foods	Thoroughly cook raw food from animal sources, such as beef, pork and poultry; and wash raw vegetables thoroughly
Refrigeration alone is not enough to prevent Listeria	Keep uncooked meats separate from vegetables, and from cooked ready-to-eat foods