



Q&A

Common Questions and Answers From Pregnant Women About Listeriosis

Q. What is listeriosis?

A. It's a serious illness caused by eating food contaminated with Listeria bacteria. These germs can affect you and your unborn baby, newborns, and other people with immune systems weakened by cancer, diabetes and other diseases.

Q. How can I get listeriosis?

A. By eating foods that are contaminated with Listeria monocytogenes. These dangerous bacteria have been found in Queso Fresco-style soft cheeses and other foods made from unpasteurized milk.

Q. Why am I at risk during pregnancy?

A. During pregnancy, parts of your immune system are suppressed. That's why pregnant women are 20 times more likely than other healthy adults to get listeriosis. Approximately one third of all cases occur in pregnant women; also at high risk are newborns and fetuses.

Q. I'm Latina. Am I at greater risk for listeriosis?

A. From a biological standpoint, no. Latinas are not more susceptible to listeriosis. But from a dietary standpoint, Latinas have a higher chance of getting listeriosis than a non-Hispanic pregnant woman because of their food choices. Latinas are more likely to purchase and eat homemade Mexican-style soft cheeses from local vendors – and these cheeses are often made with unpasteurized milk. Many cases of listeriosis within Hispanic communities have been linked to eating homemade cheeses.

Q. I've never known anyone that had this happen. Why should I worry?

A. It's very possible that someone you know has lost a baby because of listeriosis, and it just wasn't diagnosed or recorded. The Food and Drug Administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are tracking the incidence of listeriosis in the United States, and they have linked the high incidence of the disease among Hispanic pregnant women to eating Queso Fresco-style cheese made with unpasteurized milk.

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Q. What are the symptoms of listeriosis?

A. You may experience fever, chills, muscle aches, nausea and diarrhea, or upset stomach. Or, you may not feel sick at all — yet the infection can still severely affect your unborn baby. Listeriosis can lead to miscarriage, stillbirth, premature labor, the delivery of a low-birth-weight infant, a wide range of health problems for a newborn, or even infant death. If infection spreads to your nervous system, headaches, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance, or convulsions can occur. In extreme cases, death can occur.

Q. How long does it take to get symptoms?

A. The symptoms can take a few days or even weeks to appear. If you think you may have eaten contaminated cheese while pregnant, you should see a doctor immediately. A doctor may perform a blood test to see if you have it.

Q. How can listeriosis be treated?

A. Your doctor may prescribe antibiotics that are safe to use during pregnancy. Antibiotics may also be given to your baby if he/she is born with listeriosis.

Q. How can I prevent listeriosis?

A. The most important thing to do is to avoid eating Mexican-style Queso Fresco cheese, including Queso Fresco, Panela, Asadero, or Queso Blanco made from unpasteurized milk. Do not eat this type of cheese unless it is commercially processed and the label says that it is made with pasteurized milk. Never buy cheese sold door-to-door or from an unlicensed street vendor — chances are it is made from raw (unpasteurized) milk.