

Background Information for Educators

What You Need To Know

I. About *Listeria* and Listeriosis

Listeriosis is a Foodborne Illness

Listeriosis is a serious disease caused by eating foods that are contaminated with the *Listeria monocytogenes* (“*Listeria*”) bacterium.

- This germ is commonly found in soil, water, decaying vegetation, and the intestinal tract of animals.
- It can also be found in:
 - Soft cheeses or other products **made from unpasteurized milk**
 - Processed foods that **become contaminated** — such as deli meats
- Unlike many other foodborne bacteria, *Listeria* grows in the refrigerator.

Heat processes like **pasteurization** destroy *Listeria*. For pregnant women, the key is to **avoid cheeses and other foods made from unpasteurized milk**. If a pregnant woman contracts listeriosis, she can suffer severe consequences — including pre-term labor or the loss of her baby.

Symptoms of Listeriosis

Listeriosis is tricky to detect. Sometimes it causes symptoms. Sometimes a mother may be passing it to her unborn baby *without even knowing it* because she doesn’t feel sick at all.

- **Listeriosis can cause** fever, chills, muscle aches, nausea and diarrhea, or upset stomach. If infection spreads to the nervous system, it can lead to headaches, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance, or convulsions. In extreme cases, death can occur.
- **Even if there are no symptoms**, the disease can still **severely affect the unborn baby**. It 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.

Symptoms can occur within a few days or even weeks after eating the contaminated cheese.

Treating Listeriosis

Pregnant women (and other people who have weakened immune systems) who believe they have eaten contaminated cheese should seek medical attention immediately. A doctor may need to prescribe antibiotics. A newborn baby may also be given antibiotics if he/she is born with listeriosis.



What You Need To Know (cont'd)

II. Educating about Mexican-style Soft Cheeses

Eating Unpasteurized Cheese Puts Women and their Babies At Risk

Flavors in foods that are like those from home can be a comfort to a person coming to the U.S. from another country. But in the case of Mexican-style soft cheeses made from “raw” (unpasteurized) milk, the results can be tragic.

- As Hispanics emigrate to the U.S., their search for authentic tastes from home unknowingly puts them at risk for listeriosis. The most common cause is the eating of Mexican-style soft cheeses like Queso Fresco that have been made with “raw” unpasteurized milk.
- Many types of cheeses can be made in this style, including: **Queso Fresco, Panela, Asadero and Queso Blanco.**

These soft, white, moist cheeses are a staple in many Hispanic diets. Many feel that these cheeses taste much better made the traditional way with unpasteurized milk. However, what many people probably don't realize is that this taste preference puts them at risk – because **unless the milk is pasteurized first, it can carry the bacteria that cause listeriosis!**



Looking At The Statistics: *Pregnant Hispanic Women and Listeriosis*

Listeriosis affects people of all races and genders – but **pregnant women** are 20 times more likely than other healthy adults to get listeriosis. Hormonal changes that occur during pregnancy affect the mother's immune system, which leads to greater susceptibility to listeriosis.

- One-third of all listeriosis cases in the U.S. occur in pregnant women ¹.

Studies have also revealed that **Pregnant U.S. Hispanic women** are more likely to get listeriosis due to eating homemade Mexican-style soft cheeses made with unpasteurized milk. That's why it's critical to get preventive information out to these women.

Other Risks with Queso Fresco-style Cheeses That Affect *All* Consumers

Recent illnesses in New York have linked cheese made with unpasteurized milk to **Tuberculosis**. In California, illnesses have linked cheese made with unpasteurized milk to **Brucellosis**.

For more information on these threats, visit the FDA's Web site: www.cfsan.fda.gov.

Alert for Pregnant Women: *Don't Buy Homemade Cheese Sold Door-to-Door*

Sometimes, Latino entrepreneurs have been known to purchase raw milk and use it to make homemade cheese, then sell it door-to-door or from an ice chest in their communities. Unlicensed vendors also sell it from carts. Remind women not to purchase or eat this cheese. It could harm their unborn child!

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2001

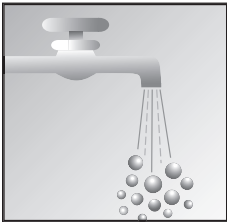
What You Need To Know (cont'd)

III. Preventing Listeriosis

The single most important thing a pregnant Hispanic woman can do to prevent listeriosis is to **avoid eating cheese made from unpasteurized milk**. In addition, there are some general food safety guidelines that can further aid in preventing infection.

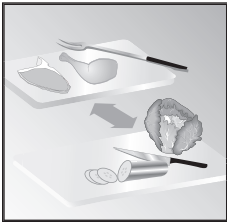
4 Simple Steps to Prevent Foodborne Illness

In addition to avoiding cheese that may have been made from unpasteurized milk, these four simple steps can further reduce the likelihood of getting listeriosis and other foodborne illnesses:



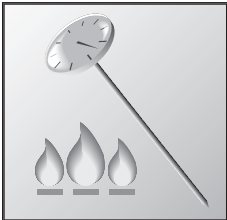
1. Clean

- Before, during, and after food preparation, wash hands and kitchen surfaces often with hot water and soap.
- *Listeria* can grow at refrigerator temperatures, so clean your refrigerator regularly and wipe up spills inside immediately. Use hot water and a mild liquid dishwashing detergent, then rinse thoroughly and dry with a clean cloth or paper towel.



2. Separate

- Keep raw meats separate from other foods, such as fruits and vegetables.



3. Cook

- Thoroughly cook and reheat food to a safe internal temperature before eating. Thoroughly cook meat, poultry, and seafood.



4. Chill

- Your refrigerator should register at **40° F (4° C)** or below. Place a refrigerator thermometer in the refrigerator and check the temperature periodically.
- Store perishable foods that are pre-cooked or ready-to-eat in your refrigerator and eat them *as soon as possible*.

For More Information

Visit www.cfsan.fda.gov (Spanish and English)
or call 1-800-SAFEFOOD (English only).

Other On-line Sources:

www.foodsafety.gov

U.S. Partnership for Food Safety Education – www.fightbac.org

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – www.cdc.gov

United States Department of Agriculture – www.usda.gov