

# Listeriosis

## What is listeriosis and what causes it?

Listeriosis (lis-tier-e-O-sis) is an infection caused by the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes* (MONO-cy-TAH-jin-ees). The disease occurs worldwide but is diagnosed more often in humans in urban areas in developed countries. Few people get listeriosis, but it is an important disease because of its high death rate due to brain inflammation and blood infection.

## What animals get listeriosis?

In animals, listeriosis is most common in ruminants (sheep, goats and cattle) but occasional cases have occurred in rabbits, guinea pigs, dogs, cats, pigs, poultry, canaries, parrots and other species.

A wide variety of domestic and wild mammals, birds, fish and crustaceans can carry the bacteria without getting sick.

## How can my animal get listeriosis?

*Listeria* bacteria are widespread in the environment in soil, plants, mud and streams. Cattle, sheep and goats usually get sick from eating (**oral**) contaminated corn silage (livestock feed that is harvested while green and partially fermented in a silo or bunker). Poor quality silage with a high pH (low acid content) has been involved in most outbreaks because the bacteria can multiply in this environment.

## How does listeriosis affect my animal?

In ruminants, listeriosis can cause encephalitis (inflammation of the brain), abortion or blood poisoning. Signs include depression, loss of appetite, fever, lack of coordination, salivation, facial paralysis, and circling. Disease is more common in younger animals (1 to 3 years old). Infection can also cause mastitis in cows.

## Can I get listeriosis?

Yes. Humans can become infected with *Listeria*. Most infections are caused by eating the bacteria in food (**oral**), but the bacteria can also be spread by inhalation (**aero-sol**) or direct contact. Most cases in the United States involve newborns. Women can become infected during pregnancy but usually show no signs of illness, however their fetus or newborn infant can die from the infection. The elderly or individuals with weak immune systems are also at greater risk for the disease. A skin infection form of the disease can occur in people who handle sick animals.

## Who should I contact, if I suspect listeriosis?

### In Animals –

Contact your veterinarian.

### In Humans –

Contact your physician.

## How can I protect my animal from listeriosis?

Feeding good quality corn silage with a low pH (high acid content) can decrease the risk of listeriosis to ruminants. Avoid spoiled or moldy silage and silage from the top layer (few inches) which has been exposed to air. Any leftover silage should be removed from the feedbunk after feeding. Rodents should be controlled. Animals sick with listeriosis should be isolated from other animals. If an animal aborts, the placenta and fetus should be properly disposed of to prevent animal and human contact.

## How can I protect myself from listeriosis?

Thoroughly cook all food, especially meats. Wash fruits and vegetables before eating them. Do not eat or drink unpasteurized milk products. Pregnant women or people with weak immune systems should avoid soft style cheeses and deli meats.

When assisting ruminant animals during the birthing process, wear gloves. Always wash your hands after touching animals.

## For More Information

CFSPH Technical Fact Sheets. Listeriosis at <http://www.cfsph.iastate.edu/DiseaseInfo/>

