



# Listeria monocytogenes (*L. monocytogenes*)

## What is it?

- Listeria is a rare, but potentially life-threatening disease. Although some adults experience only mild infections of the eye and skin, and gastroenteritis, it can lead to severe blood poisoning (septicaemia) or meningitis.
- Pregnant women, the elderly and people with weakened immune systems, including those suffering from cancer, AIDS or alcoholism, are more susceptible to listeria. It is particularly dangerous in pregnancy as it can cause a mild 'flu-like' illness which is not serious to the mother but can cause miscarriage, premature delivery, stillbirth or severe illness in a newborn child.

## Where is it found?

- *L. monocytogenes* is widely distributed in nature. It has been isolated from healthy animals and humans, as well as soils and vegetation.
- *L. monocytogenes* has also been found in many foods, including unpasteurised dairy products, ice cream, raw vegetables, raw and cooked poultry, raw meat (all types), pâté, and raw and smoked fish.

## Why is it a problem?

- *L. monocytogenes* has been known to cause a serious but rare infection known as listeriosis.
- The illness generally causes influenza-like symptoms, fever, nausea, vomiting and/or diarrhoea.

- Serious manifestations of listeriosis can include septicaemia, meningitis, encephalitis, and infections in pregnant women that may result in spontaneous abortion or stillbirth.

## Who is at risk?

- Foetuses, newborns, pregnant women, the elderly and those with a depressed immune system are particularly susceptible to infection by *L. monocytogenes*.
- Healthy people may show no symptoms of having listeriosis.
- It is thought that a dose of less than 1000 organisms is unlikely to cause disease in healthy individuals but may cause disease in susceptible individuals.

## How can the risk be reduced?

- To slow the growth of *L. monocytogenes* high risk foods should be kept below 4°C and for the shortest time possible.
- Avoiding cross contamination of food through good food hygiene and proper food handling can also reduce the risk of infection.
- Susceptible individuals can further minimise the risk of listeriosis by taking special dietary precautions, which includes avoiding high risk foods.