



Atlanta Women's

OBSTETRICS & GYNECOLOGY, PC

Women Proudly Caring for Women

275 Collier Road NW Suite 230
Atlanta, GA 30309
www.awog.org

Telephone (404) 352-3616
Facsimile (404) 352-2028
Answering Service (404) 609-0358

Dietary Risk Factors for Sporadic Listeriosis

Certain ready to eat foods, including some soft cheeses and delicatessen foods, can cause listeriosis, especially in high-risk individuals. New causes were identified in studies funded by the FDA and conducted by the National Centers for Disease Control.

Those at highest risk for developing serious problems from listeriosis are pregnant women, elderly persons, newborns, and patients with severely impaired immune systems from cancer. Patients with cirrhosis, diabetes, and ulcerative colitis are also vulnerable to infections caused by the bacteria listeriosis monocytogenes.

In 301 confirmed cases of listeriosis identified by CDC researchers from November 1988 through December 1990 in four states, about one third were associated with eating Mexican style soft cheese (such as Queso Blanco and Queso Fresco), feta cheese, undercooked chicken, and delicatessen foods (including ready-to-eat meats or cold cuts). Past studies have implicated Brie, Camembert, and blue-veined cheeses such as Roquefort.

Though the rate of listeriosis infection was found to be low for the total population (7.4 cases per million), 23% of the cases were fatal, a rate substantially higher than that associated with other food-borne illness. While listeriosis poses minimal risk to most healthy individuals, infections during pregnancy (found in one-third of the cases studied) may lead to miscarriage, stillbirth, or septicemia or meningitis in the newborn.

Since the new studies confirm that most people with listeriosis fall into high-risk groups who need routine medical care, physicians are advised to counsel high-risk patients to:

- Avoid soft cheeses such as Queso Blanco, Queso Fresco, feta, Brie, Camembert, and "blue" cheese. Cottage cheese has not been found to be a problem.
- Thoroughly cook all meat, seafood, and poultry.
- Reheat leftovers or ready-to-eat foods, such as hot dogs, thoroughly until steaming.
- Avoid foods sold at delicatessen counters and other places where cross contamination of raw and cooked foods may occur.
- Avoid any products that may have been prepared from unpasteurized milk, another source of bacteria.

FDA and the Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service routinely monitor and test foods for bacterial contamination. Regulatory action is taken when detectable levels of harmful bacteria are found. Preliminary data suggest that the rate of listeriosis may have declined substantially during 1991 in several areas, perhaps related to intensified efforts to reduce food contamination.
