

FACT SHEET: *Listeria monocytogenes*

Listeria is a bacterium that is commonly found in the environment. Most people are routinely exposed to *Listeria* with no health consequences. However, one type of *Listeria* – *Listeria monocytogenes* – is extremely pathogenic. *Listeria monocytogenes* or *Lm* infections can lead to a very serious disease, listeriosis, particularly among at-risk populations: [people who are pregnant and their newborns](#), [adults aged 65 or older](#), and [people with weakened immune systems](#). Listeriosis is characterized by flu-like symptoms including fever, muscle aches and, sometimes, gastrointestinal symptoms. Centers for Disease Control [resources on *Listeria*](#)

Lm can be found in unprocessed foods like raw milk, meat, poultry, fish and fresh fruits and vegetables. *Lm* also can be found in some processed, ready-to eat (fully cooked) foods like cheese, ice cream and deli meats likely as a result of post-processing contamination. Like other bacteria, *Lm* is very susceptible to heat. Heating products to 160F for a few seconds is sufficient to kill these bacteria.

Industry and Government Action to Prevent *Listeria* Outbreaks

Since 2000, the prevalence rate of *L. monocytogenes* in ready-to-eat meat and poultry products has dropped significantly. The industry has developed robust food safety programs to protect against *Lm* and other food safety concerns, investing millions in equipment design, employee training, pathogen tracking and analysis, foreign material control and prevention, sanitation, and allergen control.

The Meat Institute has:

- prioritized [research on *Listeria*](#) through the Meat Foundation.
- provided training for members through its twice yearly [Listeria Workshops](#).
- partnered with FMI, the Food Industry Association, to develop [best practices for retail delis](#).
- Additional Meat Institute [Food Safety Resources](#).

Both the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) and the Food and Drug Administration have strict regulatory standards for ready-to-eat products. These standards include a “zero tolerance” for *L. monocytogenes* on all ready-to-eat foods, the strictest standard in the world. Foods found to contain *Lm* are either withheld from distribution into the food supply or recalled.

As a result, according to the [most recent foodborne illness source report](#) from the Interagency Food Safety Analytics Collaboration (IFSAC), in 2021 less than 25 percent of *Listeria monocytogenes* illnesses were linked to meat and poultry food products. FSIS’s sampling data of ready-to-eat meat and poultry items have shown a dramatic decline in the last 25 years, which is attributed to industry’s efforts targeting *Listeria monocytogenes*.

Despite meat industry and FSIS efforts in employing safeguards and improvements in processing technologies, post-processing contamination, even in the consumer’s home there is a potential risk for *L. monocytogenes* contamination. The prevalence of *L. monocytogenes* in the consumer environment makes vigilance, proper food handling procedures and sanitation essential for protecting at-risk consumers.

- FSIS [Best Practices Guidance](#) for Controlling *Listeria monocytogenes* in Retail Delicatessens
- FSIS [Listeria Q and A for Consumers](#)