FACTSHEET - Listeriosis

What is Listeriosis?
Listeriosis is an infection that usually develops after eating food contaminated by listeria bacteria. In most people, listeriosis is mild and causes symptoms including a high temperature (fever), vomiting and diarrhoea. These symptoms usually pass within three days without the need for treatment.

However, in rare cases, the infection can be more severe and spread to other parts of your body, causing serious complications, such as meningitis. Common signs of severe listeriosis include a stiff neck, severe headache and tremors. Listeriosis can be fatal and in pregnant women it can cause miscarriage and stillbirth.

Who does it affect?
Anyone - but some people are particularly vulnerable to severe listeriosis. This includes:

- people over 65 years of age
- pregnant women and their unborn babies
- babies less than one month old
- people with a weakened immune system, such as those with HIV/AIDS or receiving chemotherapy

Preventing listeriosis?
Listeria bacteria have been found in a range of chilled ready-to-eat foods, including cooked sliced meats, pre-packed sandwiches, pâté, butter, soft cheeses (e.g. Brie and Camembert, or others with a similar rind), soft blue cheese and smoked fish). The best way to prevent getting listeriosis is to always ensure that you follow good basic food hygiene. This includes:

- Not using food after its "use by" date
- Making sure that the temperature of your fridge is 0-5°C
- Following storage instructions on food labels
- Always cooking food thoroughly and checking cooking instructions carefully, including the cooking time.

Advice for ‘at risk’ groups

If you're in a high-risk group for catching listeriosis, you should avoid eating foods known to be at risk of listeria contamination.

Foods to avoid include:

- soft mould-ripened cheese – such as Brie, Camembert and chèvre (a type of goat's cheese)
- soft blue-veined cheese – such as Danish blue and gorgonzola
- all types of pâté – including vegetable pâté
- unpasteurised milk
• undercooked food

It's safe to eat hard blue-veined cheese during pregnancy, such as Stilton, as well as other types of hard cheese, including Cheddar and Parmesan – even if these are made from unpasteurised milk.

Farm animals

Pregnant women should avoid close contact with farm animals that are giving birth or have recently given birth. This is to avoid the small, but serious, risk of an infection.

Effective hand hygiene is the most important way to prevent cross-infection.

For further information please see www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Listeriosis