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Health

ATTENTION

Public Health Update

The Westchester County Department of Health provides public health updates to members of the medical community on important issues affecting public health in Westchester

September 19, 2002

***Listeria* infections in the United States including New York City and State**

- **The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and State Health Departments are investigating a cluster of 24 cases of *Listeria* infections identified since 1 July 2002 in residents of several states including New York State and New York City.**
- **No cases of *Listeria* infection related to this outbreak have been identified in Westchester County**
- **Please consider *Listeria* in the differential, obtain appropriate testing, and report all suspect or laboratory confirmed cases of *Listeria* infections to the Westchester County Health Department (914-813-5159).**
- **Please remind patients at increased risk for serious infection with *Listeria* (pregnant patients, immunocompromised patients, neonates, the elderly) of precautions to reduce their risk of *Listeria* infection.**

Please distribute to staff in the Departments of Obstetrics & Gynecology, Internal Medicine, Pediatrics, Family Medicine, Infectious Diseases, Gastroenterology, Emergency Medicine, and Laboratory Services

Dear Colleagues,

CDC and State Health Departments are investigating a cluster of *Listeria* infections that have been identified since 7/1/02. Thus far, *Listeria* bacteria isolated from 24 patients have been shown to have matching DNA patterns; this strongly suggests that these patients acquired illness from a common source. These 24 patients live in southeastern Pennsylvania (the Philadelphia area) [10], New York City (NYC) [8], New York State-outside of NYC [2], Maryland [2], Connecticut [1], and Michigan [1]. All patients were hospitalized and 3 (2 in New York City and 1 in Michigan) have died. Federal and state public health officials are working to determine the food that caused these illnesses. Cases are continuing to be identified into September.*

In addition to the 24 patients whose illnesses have been confirmed as part of the cluster, CDC and State Health Departments are investigating other cases of *Listeria* infection in the same region. **To date, three cases of *Listeria* have been diagnosed in Westchester County in 2002, none of these are related to this cluster. An average of 6-12 cases of *Listeria* a year has been reported in Westchester County for the past 5 years.**

*CDC, Update: Listeriosis Outbreak Investigation: www.cdc.gov/od/oc/media/pressrel/r020918b.htm

Listeriosis, a bacterial disease caused by *Listeria monocytogenes*, is uncommon, and usually occurs sporadically. Although it can cause mild illness in immunocompetent adults, it can also cause sepsis and meningoencephalitis in newborns and adults, and spontaneous abortion in pregnant women. Neonates, the elderly, immunocompromised hosts and pregnant women are at greatest risk for serious or fatal infection.

Listeria infection should be considered in any patient presenting with gastrointestinal or neurological symptoms, especially neonates, immunocompromised hosts and pregnant women. Blood and cerebrospinal fluid cultures are the most useful tests for diagnosing *Listeria*. Clinical laboratories should be informed of the potential diagnosis when evaluating blood and cerebrospinal fluid samples.

For additional information, including prevention measures for patients, please refer to the attached NYSDOH Fact Sheet and CDC website (www.cdc.gov/od/oc/media/pressrel/r020918b.htm)

Please contact the Westchester County Department of Health for questions and reporting of cases.

Westchester County Department of Health:

914-813-5159 M-F 8:30-4:30 PM

or

914-813-5000 (24 hours/day, 7 days/week)

The Westchester County Health Department thanks the medical and laboratory communities for their continued collaboration in the investigation of communicable diseases.

Sincerely,

Belinda Ostrowsky

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Acknowledgements: We wish to acknowledge and thank the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, especially Vasudha Reddy, M.P.H., Sharon Balter, M.D., and Marcelle Layton, M.D. for providing some of the above information.

New York State Department of Health Communicable Disease Fact Sheet

Listeriosis

What is listeriosis?

Listeriosis is a bacterial infection caused by *Listeria monocytogenes*. While many bacteria generally infect specific locations within the human body, listeria may infect many different sites, such as the brain or spinal cord membranes or the bloodstream.

Who gets listeriosis?

Anyone can get the disease, but those at highest risk are newborns, the elderly, people with weakened immune systems and pregnant women. About 30 percent of cases occur in newborns within the first three weeks of life.

When do listeria infections occur?

Infections occur throughout the year. Although most cases occur sporadically, foodborne outbreaks do occur.

How is listeriosis spread?

Listeria bacteria are widely distributed in nature and can be found in water and soil. Infected animals may also serve as sources. Unlike other organisms, listeria can be spread by several different methods. Ingestion (foodborne transmission) of the organism, such as through unpasteurized milk or contaminated vegetables, is often a source of cases. In newborn infections, the organism may be transmitted from mother to fetus in utero, or directly to the fetus at the time of birth. Direct contact with the organism can cause lesions on the hands or arms, and person-to-person transmission can occur through sexual contact. Infection is also possible by inhaling the organism.

What are the symptoms of listeriosis?

Because listeriosis can affect many different parts of the body, the symptoms vary. For meningoencephalitis, the onset can be sudden with fever, intense headache, nausea, vomiting and signs of meningeal irritation. In other body locations, various types of lesions at the site of infection are the primary symptom. In most cases, listeria infection causes fever and influenza-like symptoms resembling many other illnesses.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Listeriosis has an extremely variable incubation period. In large outbreaks, the range has extended from three to 70 days but symptoms usually appear within a month.

How is this disease diagnosed?

Specific laboratory tests are the only way to identify this disease. Since many cases may be mild, the disease may be more common than is realized.

Are there any unusual features of this disease?

Listeria infections are a significant risk for pregnant women, who may not experience obvious symptoms. Infection of the fetus can occur before delivery and can cause abortion as early as the second month of pregnancy, but more often in the fifth and six months. An infection later in pregnancy may cause exposure during birth, sometimes resulting in infection of the newborn which may be fatal.

Does past infection with listeria make a person immune?

Past infection does not appear to produce immunity.

What is the treatment for listeria infection?

Several antibiotics are effective against this organism. Ampicillin, either alone or in combination with other antibiotics, is frequently used.

What can be done to prevent the spread of this disease?

Since the organism is widespread in nature, basic sanitary measures such as using only pasteurized dairy products, eating cooked meats and washing hands thoroughly before preparing foods offer the best protection. Pregnant women and persons with weakened immune systems may wish to avoid such foods as soft cheeses and raw hot dogs. Although the risk of listeriosis associated with foods from deli counters is relatively low, pregnant women and immunosuppressed persons may choose to avoid these foods or thoroughly reheat cold cuts before eating.