

Chow Line

News from the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

If you're at risk, be aware of Listeria

Last weekend at a cookout, I ate a raw hot dog. Someone there told me I should never eat raw hot dogs because of the risk of foodborne illness. But I always thought hot dogs are already cooked, and you really only need to heat them up if you want them hot. Who is right?

Hot dogs, or rather frankfurters or wieners, are cooked (sometimes smoked) sausages. Although most people can eat them "raw" without a problem, a foodborne illness outbreak in 1998 associated with unheated hot dogs and deli meats caused 108 illnesses, four miscarriages and 14 fatalities. The culprit was *Listeria monocytogenes*, which can cause the illness listeriosis, especially in pregnant women and other high-risk populations.

Those populations include people who are taking immunity-suppressing drugs, those with diabetes or other conditions that weaken the immune system, and anyone over the age of 60. If you're in one of those groups, heat hot dogs until steaming hot and keep them at 140 degrees F until served.

Listeriosis is a relatively rare but severe disease. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that about 1,600 people become ill with it each year, compared with an estimated 1.2 million illnesses from *Salmonella* bacteria. But of those who get listeriosis, an estimated 1 in 6 die. That's one reason why you should take it seriously.

Another fact to keep in mind: *Listeria* is different from many other foodborne pathogens because it can actually grow in the fridge. The more cells there are of a pathogen, the higher risk it poses. Not to be a killjoy, but you should remember this the next time you consider eating a cold dog instead of hot dog.



photo: liquidlibrary

Unfortunately, *Listeria* isn't confined to lunchmeats and frankfurters. The largest outbreak in the U.S. was in 2011, when listeriosis associated with cantaloupes from a Colorado farm caused 147 illnesses, 33 deaths and one miscarriage. Earlier, in 1985, listeriosis from Mexican-style soft cheese contaminated with raw milk caused 142 illnesses, 18 deaths, and 20 miscarriages or stillbirths. Other recent outbreaks have been associated with ice cream, commercially sold caramel apples, cheese and raw sprouts. As you can see, many foods associated with *Listeria monocytogenes* aren't normally cooked before eaten, so we lose that protective step with those foods.

According to the CDC, *Listeria* is found in the environment and we're exposed to it regularly. If you're at higher risk of foodborne illness, pay heed if you become very sick with fever and muscle aches or stiff neck, or if you're pregnant and develop mild flu-like symptoms. These are symptoms of listeriosis — contact your doctor immediately.

To reduce your risk, avoid drinking raw milk or products made from raw milk; rinse produce thoroughly under running tap water before eating; and wash hands, knives, countertops and cutting boards after handling and preparing raw foods. For more information, see www.foodsafety.gov and look under "Food Poisoning" for listeria.

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By Martha Filipic
614-292-9833
filipic.3@osu.edu

Editor: This column was reviewed by Sanja Ilic, Ohio State University Extension's food safety specialist.

Chow Line is a service of the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences and its outreach and research arms, Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to *Chow Line*, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1043, or filipic.3@osu.edu.

College Communications
2021 Coffey Road
Columbus, OH 43210-1043
614-292-2011

208 Research Services Building
1680 Madison Ave.
Wooster, OH 44691-4096
330-263-3780

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