

# Vulnerable consumers advised of ongoing risk of *Listeria* associated with ready to eat smoked fish

The Food Standards Agency (FSA), Food Standards Scotland (FSS), and the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) are reinforcing their advice to vulnerable groups of consumers in relation to the risks of *Listeria monocytogenes* infection linked to ready to eat smoked fish.

The advice to those who are over 65, pregnant or have weakened immune systems is that they should ensure that ready to eat smoked fish is thoroughly cooked before they eat it. 'Ready to eat smoked fish' refers to chilled smoked fish products that would not normally be cooked at home before being eaten.

This is because of an ongoing outbreak of *Listeria monocytogenes* which is particularly unsafe for those who are susceptible to *Listeria* infection.

The investigation has identified 14 linked cases of listeriosis since 2020, with eight of these since January 2022. Cases have been identified in England and Scotland. The majority of these individuals reported eating ready to eat smoked fish. One case has been a pregnant woman.

Listeriosis is a form of food poisoning caused by the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*. Most people who are affected get mild gastroenteritis which subsides in a few days.

However, certain individuals are particularly at risk of severe illness such as meningitis and life-threatening sepsis. These include those over the age of 65, those with certain underlying conditions such as cancer, liver and kidney failure or who are taking medications which can weaken the immune system. Listeriosis in pregnancy can cause miscarriages and severe sepsis or meningitis in new-born babies.

While the risks to the general public of becoming seriously ill due to *Listeria* are very low, we need people who are vulnerable – specifically those over 65, pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems – to be aware of the ongoing risks of consuming ready to eat smoked fish.

If anyone from these groups is eating ready to eat smoked fish, we are reminding them of the advice to ensure that it is thoroughly cooked before they eat it including when served as part of a dish.

People can also further reduce the risk by keeping chilled ready to eat smoked fish cold (5°C or below), always using products by their use-by date, following the storage instructions on the label, and cooking it until it is piping hot right through.

**Dr Caroline Handford, Acting Head of Incidents at the Food Standards Agency**

Most people won't have any symptoms of the infection or will only experience mild symptoms such as abdominal pain or diarrhoea, which usually pass within a few

days without the need for treatment.

However, some people are at higher risk of much more serious illness, including those over 65, people who are pregnant or new-born babies, and those with weakened immune systems including people undergoing immunosuppressive treatment, and people with chronic liver or kidney disease.

In light of this ongoing outbreak, we are advising pregnant and vulnerable people to only eat ready to eat smoked fish that has been thoroughly cooked to reduce the risk of listeriosis. If you have any concerns about your health please speak to your midwife, GP or hospital specialist team.

**Professor Saheer Gharbia, Interim Deputy Director Gastrointestinal Infections and Food Safety at UKHSA**

## **More on Listeria:**

*Listeria* is a bacterium that causes an illness called listeriosis. It is widespread in the environment and once a food product has been contaminated it can grow on food at standard refrigeration temperatures. It can be destroyed by thorough cooking. It is of most concern in chilled, ready to eat foods that are not normally cooked before being eaten, such as smoked fish. The full list risky foods associated with listeriosis is available on the [NHS website: Listeriosis page](#).

The risk of listeriosis is particularly high but not completely limited to individuals above 65 years of age, those with cancer, organ transplants, patients taking steroids, patients undergoing immunosuppressive or cytotoxic treatment including biologics and chemotherapy, people who are pregnant and their unborn or new-born babies, those with uncontrolled HIV infection, uncontrolled diabetes, chronic liver or kidney disease, people with an alcohol dependency and those with iron overload.

More information can be found on the [Listeria guidance page](#) on the FSA website.