

Safe Food for Vulnerable Groups

1 February 2005

Am I in a vulnerable group?

Food poisoning can be highly unpleasant and in some cases can also be very dangerous for people with compromised immune systems.

People who fall into this category include:

- Pregnant Women.
- Young Children.
- Elderly.
- Diabetics.
- People with HIV/AIDS.
- People with cancer.
- People with liver or kidney disease.
- Organ transplant recipients and people taking medication to suppress their immune system function, including cortisone treatments.

Depending on the illness, people with diabetes, alcoholism and cirrhosis may also fall into this category.

NOTE: If you are not on this list but are in doubt, please contact your doctor.

What particular illnesses affect vulnerable groups but are almost harmless to others?

Listeria monocytogenes

Infection from *Listeria* bacteria is rare and causes mild or no symptoms in healthy people, but can be very dangerous to vulnerable people. *Listeria* can be transmitted to an unborn baby, leading to miscarriage, stillbirth or premature birth. *Listeria* can also make newborn babies very ill.

Listeria is destroyed by conventional cooking, but can grow in refrigerated food. You should eat only freshly cooked food and well-washed freshly prepared fruit and vegetables. Leftovers can be eaten if they are refrigerated promptly and kept no longer than a day. It's important not to eat food if there's any doubt about its hygienic preparation or storage.

Most chilled, ready to eat foods should be avoided altogether. This includes:

- soft cheese such as brie, blue, fetta, camembert and ricotta - safe if cooked hot,
- takeaway cooked and chilled diced chicken - as used in chicken sandwiches,
- cold meats, pate and meat spreads,
- pre-prepared or packaged salads greens and salads,
- raw seafood such as oysters, sashimi, smoked salmon or oysters (canned oysters are safe),
- sushi and sandwiches that contain the foods listed above in the filling

- unpasteurised dairy products such as raw goat's milk and Roquefort cheese

Vibrio bacteria

Some species of *Vibrio* bacteria, can cause severe illness to some vulnerable people, especially those suffering from diseases associated with the liver and stomach (eg. chronic alcoholism). In some cases, the bacteria enter the blood stream, and cause septic shock and death. Affected people may develop distinctive bulbous skin lesions

Severe *Vibrio* infections are usually associated with eating raw and undercooked shellfish like oysters, pipis, mussels and cockles .

Vibrio infections may be avoided by:

- Not eating raw oysters or other raw shellfish.
- Handling raw shellfish carefully – cuts from the shell when open may introduce *Vibrio* bacteria into the wound.
- Cooking shellfish thoroughly.
 - For shellfish in the shell, either:
 - boil until the shell opens and continue boiling for five minutes, or:
 - steam until the shells open and then continue cooking for another nine minutes.
 - Do not eat shellfish that do not open during cooking.
 - Boil oyster meat for at least three minutes, or fry them in oil for at least ten minutes.
 - Ensuring cross-contamination of cooked seafood and other foods with raw seafood and juices from raw seafood does not occur.

Mercury in Fish

Mercury occurs naturally and accumulates in the aquatic food chain. Large, long-living predatory fish tend to accumulate high levels of mercury. Research has reported a link between high consumption of certain predatory fish during pregnancy and subtle developmental delays in children, due to the harmful effects of mercury.

Pregnant women, women planning pregnancy and young children can safely eat most fish 2-3 times a week but should limit their intake of:

- Shark (flake), broadbill, marlin, and swordfish to no more than one serve (150g for adults, 65g for children six years and under) per fortnight, with no other fish consumed during that fortnight.
- Orange roughy (sea perch) and catfish to no more than one serve (150g for adults, 65g for children six years and under) per week with no other fish consumed during that week.

For further information, see the NSW Food Authority's *Pregnancy and food* fact sheet