

LISTERIA IN DELICATESSENS PROJECT

The issue

Listeriosis is a preventable foodborne illness, commonly linked to delicatessen (deli) meats and soft cheeses. Cross-contamination is a major contributing factor to *Listeria monocytogenes* contamination of ready-to-eat (RTE) foods. Control of *L. monocytogenes* cross contamination and adequate sanitation is essential to reduce the risk of listeriosis from the deli environment.

A cluster of eight listeriosis cases was detected in 2016 and attributed to foods sold through retail delis. The investigation linked listeriosis cases with an RTE meat product, its manufacturer and retail delicatessens through Whole Genome Sequencing.



What we did

In a joint project with Canada Bay and Northern Beaches Council that ran between November 2016 and March 2017, a total of 31 retail delis were surveyed. The survey gathered information on the prevalence of *L. monocytogenes* in the deli environment to determine which areas were most susceptible for *Listeria* spp.

Food and swab samples were obtained and submitted for testing for the presence of *Listeria* spp. and *L. monocytogenes*. Some food samples were additionally tested for Standard Plate Count (SPC), coliforms, faecal coliforms and *E.coli*. Compliance ratings were recorded as well as a questionnaire survey of business staff.

What we found

There was a significant gap in skills and knowledge between large, medium, and small sized food businesses. Generally, the larger the business the better the skills and knowledge.

No improvement notices were issued at these inspections for skills and knowledge, however corrective action was provided in the form of feedback at the end of inspection.

The ability to correctly sanitise surfaces and equipment had a similar compliance trend with increased business size. Corrective action was again provided in the form of feedback, with one business also receiving an Improvement Notice.

Most businesses performed well with deli meats and cheeses under temperature control. Temperature control issues were noted during high ambient temperatures for business located outside of air-conditioned shopping centres. Higher ambient temperatures had the most effect in the small businesses that were removing delicatessen meats from the display unit to slice the product fresh for customers.

Structural and maintenance standards of businesses was found to be of a high standard except for one which had severe cracking of bench laminate next to the food slicers and preparation areas.

Food contact swabbing showed no detectable *L. monocytogenes* on any food contact surfaces, however there were several detections of non-pathogenic *Listeria* spp which can suggest the possibility of potential future presence of *L. monocytogenes*.

From a total of 213 non-food contact surfaces across all 31 businesses surveyed, 11 had *L. monocytogenes* detected.

L. monocytogenes was not detected in any of the foods sampled. *Listeria* spp was only detected in four different types of foods from four different businesses.

The outcome

Overall compliance was generally found to increase with the size of the business. Individual compliance criteria - sanitising of surfaces and equipment, skills & knowledge, and structure and pest control - increased with the size of business. An exception to this was hygiene, and temperature control.

Although no *L. monocytogenes* was found in any of the food samples, *Listeria* spp. gave a useful insight into transmission of *Listeria* from the environment.

Certain areas were found to be a higher risk including:

- display area floors
- food display cabinet sliding doors,

- and display benches.



Next steps

- Share the information from the survey with the businesses involved and local government Environmental Health Officers (EHOs).
- Develop a factsheet for businesses and EHO's to address high risk areas within delis
- Revisit lower performing businesses to monitor compliance, and
- Invite additional council areas in NSW with small and medium retail delicatessens to participate in joint DPI inspections in 2017-18.

About the NSW Food Authority: The NSW Food Authority is the government organisation that helps ensure NSW food is safe and correctly labelled. It works with consumers, industry and other government organisations to minimise food poisoning by providing information about and regulating the safe production, storage, transport, promotion and preparation of food.

Note: This information is a general summary and cannot cover all situations. Food businesses are required to comply with all of the provisions of the Food Standards Code and the *Food Act 2003* (NSW).



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