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Listeria: Special Concerns in Pregnancy

At the nurse visit at the start of pregnancy, food concerns were discussed. Listeria infection prevention and avoidance of mercury in fish were the two main issues. A healthy diet in general was discussed.

Cantaloupe infected with listeria monocytogenes is in the news this fall. Listeria is found in the ground and can contaminate meat, unpasteurized dairy products, fruits and vegetables. Most healthy adults can be exposed without any harm because their immune systems protect them. Pregnant women, infants, elderly and those with a variety of medical problems are much more likely to get an infection after exposure. Between 1 and 5% of humans carry listeria in their feces and do not get ill. This is one more reason to wash hands and be careful about what you touch in public bathrooms.

All fruits and vegetables should be washed before cutting. Dairy products should be pasteurized. Meats need to be properly handled and cooked. Special care needs to be taken when eating game and processed deli meats. Some smaller delis may cross use cheese and meat cutting slicers. It is always best to avoid these foods in pregnancy if you are not sure of how they have been prepared.

The signs of listeria can vary from none, to fever and flu-like symptoms. It can act like appendicitis or a kidney infection. Diagnosis is only made by blood cultures. The infection can occur many weeks after exposure, so it often is not suspected unless there is a big outbreak like the present one. Many people are properly treated even though the diagnosis is never made.

Getting a flu shot early eliminates one area of confusion in diagnosis.

Listeria is cured by a wide variety of antibiotics that are safe in pregnancy. However, prevention is always preferred. Listeria causes miscarriage, preterm labor, poor fetal growth and newborn infection that can be severe. Please let us know if you are at high risk for infection.

Management\forms>Listeria concerns in pregnancy.docx
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