

## Deli meats and processed meat risks during pregnancy



### Why deli meats are treated differently in pregnancy

Deli meats are often ready-to-eat foods. That convenience is part of the problem: they may be eaten without a final cooking step that would kill bacteria. *Listeria monocytogenes* can contaminate foods during processing, slicing, packaging, or handling, and it has a notable ability to survive and grow at refrigerator temperatures. This makes it different from many bacteria that are slowed more effectively by cold storage.

Pregnancy is associated with altered immune function, and pregnant people are at increased risk of listeriosis compared with the general population.

According to the CDC, listeriosis during pregnancy can result in miscarriage, stillbirth, premature delivery, or life-threatening infection in the newborn.

The pregnant person may have no symptoms or only a mild illness, which is why prevention matters even when a food looks, smells, and tastes normal.

Deli meats are not the only concern. Similar caution applies to certain unpasteurized dairy products, refrigerated pâtés, refrigerated smoked seafood, and other high-risk ready-to-eat foods. If you are building a broader pregnancy food-safety plan, guidance on food safety rules and listeria risk foods during pregnancy can help put deli meat advice into context.

## **Which meats are higher risk?**

The term "deli meat" covers many products, and the risk is not identical across all of them. The greatest concern is usually with cold, ready-to-eat meats that have already been cooked or cured and then sliced, packaged, or displayed in a deli case. Examples include turkey, chicken, ham, roast beef, bologna, mortadella, pastrami, and similar sandwich meats eaten cold.

Hot dogs and frankfurters are also commonly included in pregnancy food-safety advice because they are often pre-cooked but can become contaminated before packaging or during handling. They should be reheated until steaming hot before eating. Cold cured meats, such as salami, chorizo, prosciutto, pepperoni, and some fermented or air-dried meats, may carry listeria risk and, depending on production and storage, may also raise concerns about other pathogens. NHS guidance advises caution with some cold cured meats and notes that cooking thoroughly reduces risk.

Meats that are cooked fresh and served hot, such as a thoroughly cooked chicken breast, freshly cooked beef, or hot roasted turkey served immediately, are generally different from cold deli slices. However, all meat should be cooked and handled safely. For a wider discussion of meat doneness, cross-contamination, and undercooked meat risks, see [can you eat meat and undercooked meat risks during pregnancy](#).

## **Listeria: why the consequences can be serious**

Listeriosis is uncommon, but pregnancy is one of the classic higher-risk states. The clinical challenge is that maternal symptoms can be nonspecific: fever, chills, muscle aches, headache, gastrointestinal upset, fatigue, or a flu-like illness. Some people may have minimal symptoms. In the fetus or newborn, however, infection can be much more severe because *Listeria* can cross the placenta.

Potential pregnancy complications described by public health and clinical sources include miscarriage, stillbirth, preterm labor or delivery, low birth weight, neonatal sepsis, meningitis, and other serious newborn infections. This is why clinicians and public health agencies advise avoiding higher-risk foods

rather than waiting for signs of spoilage or illness.

It is also important to keep perspective. Most exposures do not lead to infection, and many people who ate cold deli meat once or twice before learning the guidance will not develop listeriosis. The purpose of the guidance is to reduce avoidable risk over time, not to create guilt or panic.

### **How to eat deli meats more safely if you choose to have them**

If you decide to eat deli meat or hot dogs during pregnancy, the key protective step is heat. The CDC and Mayo Clinic advise reheating deli meats and hot dogs until steaming hot before eating. This means the meat should be visibly hot throughout, not just warmed slightly. If using a microwave, rotate or stir as appropriate and allow standing time so heat distributes evenly.

Reheat immediately before eating: Heat cold cuts, pre-cooked sausages, and hot dogs until steaming hot, then eat them while hot.

Avoid "warm but not hot" shortcuts: Light toasting may not heat all meat surfaces adequately, especially in thick sandwiches.

Separate foods: Keep deli meat juices away from salads, fruit, bread, and other ready-to-eat foods.

Clean contact surfaces: Wash hands, cutting boards, knives, plates, and counters after handling processed meats.

Respect storage times: Refrigerate promptly and avoid eating products past use-by dates or after prolonged room-temperature exposure.

At restaurants or delis, it can be harder to know whether meat has been heated thoroughly or whether slicers and surfaces are well controlled. If you are unsure, consider choosing a hot freshly cooked option, a vegetarian sandwich made with low-risk ingredients, or a protein you can see being cooked to order.

### **Processed meat nutrition: sodium, nitrates, and everyday balance**

The infection risk is the main pregnancy-specific reason for caution with deli meats, but nutrition also matters. Many processed meats are high in sodium, saturated fat, and preservatives. "Processed meat" generally refers to meat preserved by smoking, curing, salting, fermentation, or addition of chemical preservatives. Examples include bacon, ham, salami, sausages, hot dogs,

pepperoni, and many deli slices.

Pregnancy does not require eliminating every processed food, and rigid rules can be especially difficult for people dealing with nausea, food aversions, limited budgets, or restricted access to fresh foods. Still, using processed meats as an occasional convenience rather than a daily foundation may help support overall cardiometabolic health. For many pregnant people, protein needs can be met with safer options such as freshly cooked poultry, fish that is low in mercury, eggs cooked safely, beans, lentils, tofu, yogurt made from pasteurized milk, nuts, seeds, and well-cooked lean meats.

If you have hypertension, kidney disease, gestational diabetes, a history of preeclampsia, or are on a medically advised diet, discuss processed meat intake with your obstetric clinician, midwife, or registered dietitian. They can help tailor advice without making your diet unnecessarily restrictive.

### **What to do if you ate cold deli meat**

First, take a breath. A single exposure does not mean you will become ill. Many people accidentally eat cold deli meat before they know the recommendation, especially early in pregnancy. The next step depends on whether you have symptoms, whether the product was linked to a known outbreak or recall, and your clinician's guidance.

If you feel well, most clinicians do not recommend emergency evaluation solely because of one low-detail exposure, but you should follow your local healthcare advice. If you develop fever, chills, muscle aches, severe headache, stiff neck, confusion, diarrhea, vomiting, abdominal pain, decreased fetal movement, contractions, or any symptoms that concern you, contact your maternity care team promptly. Mention the possible food exposure and the timing.

Do not attempt to self-diagnose listeriosis or take leftover antibiotics. Testing and treatment decisions depend on symptoms, gestational age, exposure history, local outbreak information, and clinical assessment. Your healthcare professional can advise whether evaluation is needed.

### **Safer sandwich and snack ideas**

You do not have to give up satisfying lunches. The goal is to replace higher-risk cold meats with options that are either cooked fresh, reheated thoroughly, or not prone to the same listeria risk profile.

Hot sandwich options: Grilled chicken, hot roasted turkey, meatballs heated thoroughly, or a toasted sandwich where the meat is steaming hot throughout.

Egg-based options: Hard-cooked eggs or egg salad made with properly cooked eggs and refrigerated promptly.

Plant proteins: Hummus from a reputable source, bean spreads, lentil patties, tofu, tempeh cooked hot, or nut butters.

Dairy options: Pasteurized cheese, cottage cheese, or yogurt-based fillings, while following separate advice for soft cheese safety.

Leftovers: Freshly cooked meat stored safely and reheated until hot can be a practical alternative to deli slices.

If a cold sandwich is one of the few foods you can tolerate, talk with your clinician or a prenatal dietitian. They may help you find a safer version that still meets your needs, such as heating the meat first and allowing the sandwich components to remain appealing.