

Pregnant women at very high risk

ONE FETUS DEAD, 3 NEWBORNS FIGHT BUG

Doctors at General knew of outbreak four days before Quebec acknowledged it

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listeriosis is quite rare in Quebec – about 50 cases per year – so doctors knew something was up when 22 cases related to eating cheeses popped up in the past month or so.

“It was unusual and significant,” Pierre Lebel, a microbiologist and infectious diseases specialist at the Montreal General Hospital, said yesterday.

Infectious disease experts must report listeriosis cases to provincial health officials and Lebel said he and his colleagues in Montreal knew of the outbreak as of Aug. 15, four days

before the Quebec Health Department acknowledged it.

According to the Quebec Department of Health, one person in his or her 70s, a resident of the Laurentians, died of the infection, which can lead to meningitis.

Once case was in Montreal, two were in Laval, two were in the Laurentians and five were in the Montérégie.

Three-quarters of the cases were female, including seven pregnant women and one who lost her fetus in its 25th week.

Six babies were born prematurely and three newborns are now fighting the infection.

No additional information on

the victims was available.

“We’ve been warning pregnant women not to eat or drink raw (unpasteurized) dairy for a century,” Lebel said.

The lowered immune systems of pregnant women, infants under 3 months of age, people over 70 years old, and those fighting infections like HIV, or battling cancer, puts them at risk for listeriosis.

The illness comes from the listeria bacteria that originates in animals’ digestive tracts, Lebel said.

“There’s often some listeria in some of our food products,” he added. “It’s just that not everyone can handle it.”

Women in their third trimester of pregnancy are 15 to 17 times more at risk for listeriosis than non-pregnant women and men, he added.

The reason is that in the third trimester – specifically in weeks 26 to 30 – there is more contact between the mother and the ba-

by’s cells through the placenta, he explained.

The danger to the fetus actually lessens after that, although babies are once again at higher risk during the birth process.

Although listeriosis is less likely from cheese if it is pasteurized – a heating process that removes many bacteria – pasteurized cheese can also be contaminated if cut by a tainted knife or placed next to contaminated cheese, Lebel said.

The popularity in Quebec of some fine, creamy cheeses – some of which may be raw or pre-heated but not pasteurized – may raise the risk in this province, he said.

“The lesson here is that we have to inspect our cheeses more carefully,” Lebel said.

The listeria from cheese is a distinct strain from that found in some cold meat cuts recently.

An elderly woman from the Waterloo, Ont., area died recently from listeriosis, but the re-

gional health authority says the case cannot yet be linked to the national outbreak of the food-borne bacteria.

The woman, said to be in her 70s, is the second listeriosis death from the Waterloo region since an outbreak arose from a Maple Leaf Foods processing plant in Toronto, Lu-Ann Procter, a spokeswoman for the Region of Waterloo Public Health, said yesterday. Health officials have not said when she died.

The first listeriosis case in Waterloo claimed the life of another elderly woman at the end of August. A male senior citizen is recovering in hospital from the bacterium, which mostly affects the elderly, pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems. Both of these cases have been linked to the Maple Leaf Foods outbreak.

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