
Targeted Food Surveillance on *Listeria Monocytogenes* in Ready-to-eat Food

Centre for Food Safety

Food and Environmental Hygiene Department

July 2014



Background

- The Centre for Health Protection recorded 26 cases of listeriosis yearly in past two years. It is the highest number recorded since 2008 when listeriosis has been a notifiable disease.
- Listeriosis is usually caused by eating food contaminated with *Listeria monocytogenes*.
- Most healthy individuals do not develop symptoms or only have mild symptoms like fever, muscle pain, headache, nausea, vomiting or diarrhoea when infected. However, severe complications such as septicemia, meningitis or even death may occur in newborns, elderly and those with a weaker immune system. Although infected pregnant women may just experience mild symptoms generally, the infection of *Listeria monocytogenes* may cause miscarriage, infant death, preterm birth, or severe infection in the newborns.

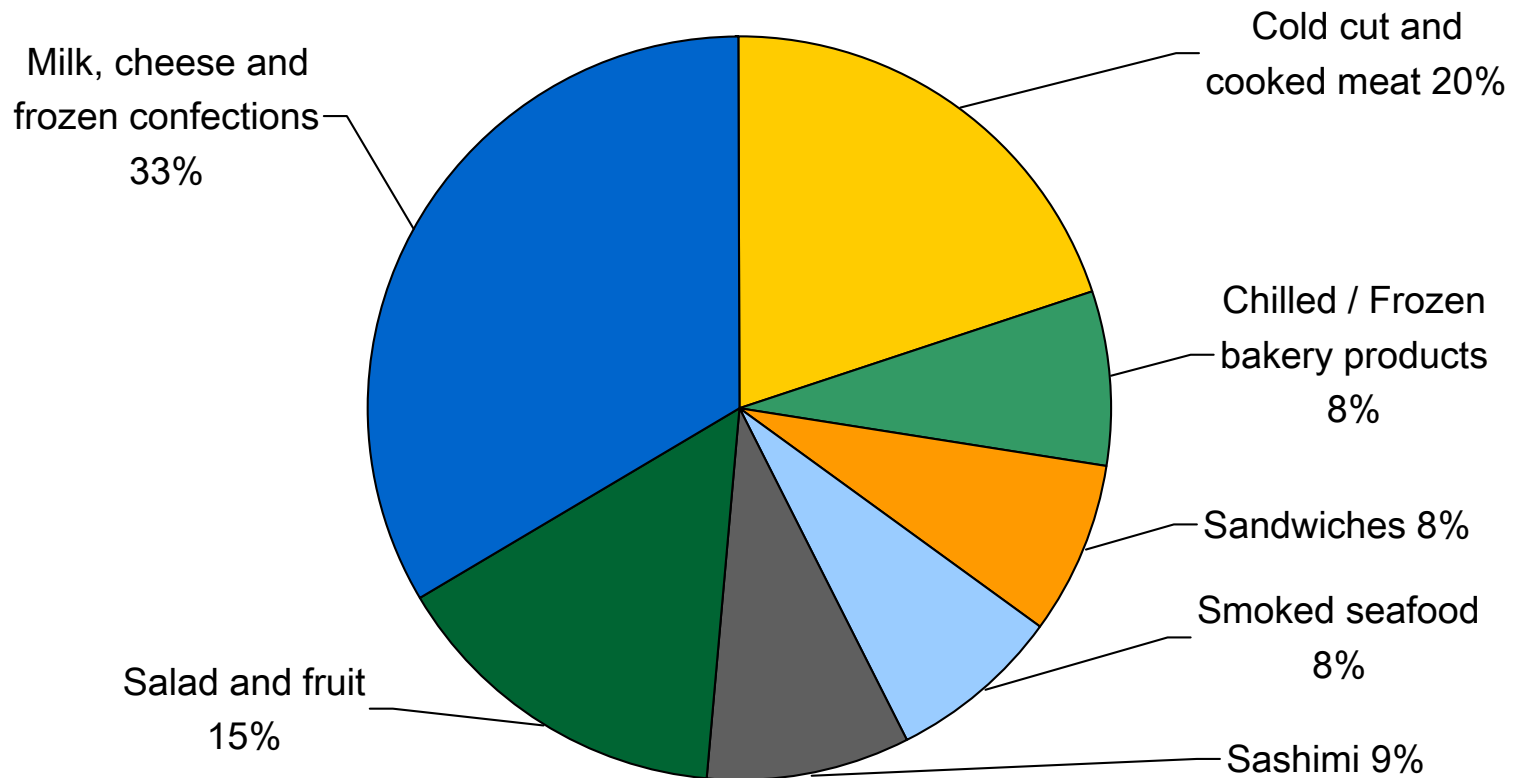
Background (Cont'd)

- *Listeria monocytogenes* may continue to grow slowly at refrigerated temperatures as low as zero degree Celsius. Refrigerated ready-to-eat food with a long shelf life is a potential high-risk item for listeriosis as prolonged storage in a refrigerator (excluding freezer) may allow *Listeria monocytogenes* to have sufficient time to grow and thus increase the consumers' risk of contracting listeriosis..
- In view of this, the Centre for Food Safety (CFS), apart from continuing its targeted surveillance on *Listeria monocytogenes* in ready-to-eat food, enhanced the sampling of high risk food by expanding the number and type of samples collected.



Types of samples

- The CFS collected 400 samples from importers and over 200 different locations (including food premises, supermarkets, convenience stores and retail outlets) from January to April this year.



N.B.: Figures in brackets are rounded and may not add up to total due to rounding.

Tests and results

- All samples were tested for *L. monocytogenes*.
- All results were satisfactory.



Follow-up actions

- Although all the samples tested were satisfactory, CFS will continue to enhance publicity and education targeted to high-risk groups, particularly pregnant women, e.g., through development, production and dissemination of electronic publications and leaflets.
- The CFS has embarked on a risk assessment study on microbiological quality of prepackaged long shelf life refrigerated ready-to-eat products. The samples were refrigerated until laboratory analysis for their microbiological quality, particularly the level of *Listeria monocytogenes*, were conducted within the week which the samples were to be expired. The result will be released in a timely manner.
- CFS will also continue the collaboration with CHP in investigation of listeriosis, and take samples of suspectedly affected food for analysis when necessary.

Advice for the trade

- Proper food handling by applying 5 keys to food safety.
 - e.g. Keep perishable foods at 4°C or below inside refrigerators and avoid cross-contamination.
- Estimate the demand of each food carefully to avoid over-production.



Advice for consumers

- Maintain food and personal hygiene.
- Keep perishable foods at 4°C or below inside refrigerators and avoid cross-contamination.
- People belong to high risk group should avoid high risk foods especially refrigerated ready-to-eat foods with long shelf life.

