



NEWS RELEASE

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USDA ISSUES DIRECTIVE TO REDUCE *LISTERIA MONOCYTOGENES* IN READY-TO-EAT MEAT AND POULTRY PRODUCTS AT SCIENTIFIC SUMMIT

WASHINGTON, D.C., Nov. 18, 2002-The U.S. Department of Agriculture today released an administrative directive outlining additional steps to be taken by USDA inspectors to ensure that establishments producing ready-to-eat meat and poultry products are taking the necessary steps to prevent contamination with *Listeria monocytogenes*.

The directive is a result of last month's announcements calling for a strengthening of current *Listeria* protocols and testing programs. Dr. Elsa Murano, USDA's undersecretary for food safety, outlined the directive during a scientific summit that is being held in Washington, D.C. today.

"This directive is an aggressive and targeted approach to further reduce the risk of listeriosis from consumption of contaminated ready-to-eat products," Agriculture Secretary Ann M. Veneman said. "The actions we are announcing today underscore this Administration's continued commitment to improving public health through scientific enhancements of our inspection process."

Under this directive, plants producing high and medium risk ready-to-eat products (deli-meats and hot dogs) that do not have an evaluated environmental testing regime designed to find and take necessary actions to eliminate *Listeria monocytogenes*, will be placed under an intensified testing program by USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS). This intensified testing program will consist of increased testing of the final product, and testing of food contact surfaces and plant environment. Plants that have an environmental testing program but do not choose to share these testing data with FSIS on an ongoing basis will also fall under the intensified testing program. As a means of verification, those plants that share complete data from their environmental testing program with FSIS will be subject to a targeted testing program, which consists of final product testing.

"There is a vast amount of data generated through environmental testing by processing facilities. Making it available to USDA will help our inspectors anticipate problems through proactive analysis of contamination trends at these establishments," said Dr. Murano.

In addition to this directive, FSIS is in the process of completing an extensive, scientific risk assessment on *Listeria monocytogenes* to determine how the pathogen may contaminate meat products during production and packaging processes.

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The risk assessment, in conjunction with a risk ranking on products from retail establishments, will provide important additional data for the Agency to finalize its rulemaking process in the coming months on an effective regulatory approach to reducing *Listeria monocytogenes* in processing plants producing ready-to-eat products.

FSIS is holding a Listeria Summit today, in Washington, D.C. The summit is one of several food safety symposia held this year by FSIS. Today's forum allows for government, academia, industry, advocacy groups and the public to present the Agency with up-to-date research data as well as comments on actions that best address *Listeria monocytogenes*. Topics being discussed include the role of environmental and product testing, decontamination strategies, and consumer behaviors regarding ready-to-eat foods.

"This summit will be helpful in obtaining additional scientific analysis, information and public input to finalize a proposed rule on *Listeria* to enhance current policies," said Dr. Garry McKee, FSIS administrator.

Consumption of food contaminated with *Listeria monocytogenes* can cause listeriosis, an uncommon but potentially fatal disease. Listeriosis can cause flu-like symptoms such as high fever, severe headache and nausea. It can also cause miscarriages and stillbirths as well as serious, and sometimes fatal, infections in infants, seniors and persons with compromised immune systems.

The *Listeria monocytogenes* directive is available on FSIS's web site at <http://www.fsis.usda.gov>. Interested parties are invited to comment on the directive until Dec. 2, 2002. After reviewing and incorporating comments, FSIS will implement the directive beginning Dec. 9, 2002. This website also contains important consumer food safety information. Consumers may also call USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline at 1-800-535-4555 for additional food safety and product recall information.

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