

The FSA and FSS remind higher-risk consumers on the risks of listeria associated with eating cold-smoked and cured fish

With the festive season approaching, consumers often eat products they don't normally eat, or consume more of certain products because of the time of year. One of those products which usually sees a rise in consumption is cold-smoked fish. It's important that consumers enjoy the festive break, but it's also important that consumers understand where they may be at higher risk.

On that basis, the FSA and FSS are reiterating their [advice to pregnant women and those with a weakened immune system to avoid eating ready-to-eat cold-smoked or cured fish](#).

As the risk of serious illness from listeriosis increases with age, the FSA and FSS are also advising that older people should be aware of the risks associated with eating these products and take steps to reduce their risk of infection.

Products include smoked salmon, smoked trout and gravlax.

The reminder follows further cases of illness recently reported in an ongoing listeria outbreak which the FSA, FSS, the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) and Public Health Scotland (PHS) have been investigating and taking steps to tackle. There have been 24 linked cases of listeriosis in this outbreak across the UK, dating back to 2020.

Listeria infection, or listeriosis, is a rare but potentially severe foodborne illness that can have serious health consequences for pregnant women (can lead to miscarriage or stillbirth), those with a weakened immune system, and older adults.

The FSA and FSS also emphasise that anyone preparing or buying food for people who are vulnerable should follow our advice on consuming ready-to-eat cold-smoked or cured fish.

We understand that smoked fish is a popular choice during the festive season, and for many, with the proper precautions, it can be enjoyed safely. However, we strongly encourage those at higher risk to either avoid cold-smoked fish or first cook it until steaming hot all the way through. This will ensure that any listeria present in the product is killed before it is eaten.

While the risk of listeria is generally low for most people, caregivers should avoid serving cold-smoked fish to family and friends who may be more vulnerable to infection if it hasn't been cooked first.

Linden Jack, Head of Food, Feed and Incidents Policy Unit at the FSA

While smoked fish has a higher risk of carrying listeria, the overall risk to the population is very low. However, some people are more likely to get a serious infection including those who are pregnant and those with weakened immune systems. The risk also increases with age.

Most people who are affected by listeriosis will have no symptoms or experience mild diarrhoea which subsides in a few days. Those who are more vulnerable can be at risk of severe illness such as meningitis and life-threatening sepsis. Listeriosis in pregnancy can cause very serious illness in mothers and their babies.

Dr Gauri Godbole, Deputy Director Gastrointestinal Infections Food Safety and One Health at the UK Health Security Agency

Our advice applies to pregnant women and those with weakened immune systems, such as people with certain underlying conditions for example cancer, diabetes, liver and kidney disease, or anyone taking medications which can weaken the immune system.

The level of risk will depend on whether the individual has underlying health conditions. The risk also increases with advancing age and in pregnancy.

Cold-smoked fish such as smoked salmon or trout, and cured fish such as gravlax, have not been fully cooked during the production process to kill any listeria that may be present, and therefore present a higher risk of infection.

‘Cold-smoked’ fish is normally labelled as ‘smoked’ fish on packaging. Ready-to-eat cold-smoked fish typically comes in thin slices, and it can be eaten cold. It may also be found in sushi.

Once thoroughly cooked, the smoked fish will be safe to eat, and can be served immediately, or served cold after being chilled in the fridge. If consumers would like to add cold-smoked fish to dishes like cooked pasta or scrambled eggs, it is important to cook it first. This is because simply warming it through while preparing a meal will not heat the fish to a high enough temperature to kill any listeria present.

Smoked fish products that have been heat-treated during production, such as tinned smoked fish, may be safely consumed without further cooking. These tinned products are heated to a high temperature during production, sufficient to kill any listeria that may be present.

More information on listeria can be found on [our Listeria page](#).