

Increasing incidence of listeriosis in European Countries

Since 2002 the incidence of listeriosis in Europe is on the increase. This can be concluded from epidemiological investigations in 9 European countries. The increase occurred mainly among persons over 60 years of age and is most pronounced in persons over 70 years of age. The cause of this selective increase is unknown.

Incidence rate in EU Member States

The average increase of incidence rate of listeriosis in 9 European countries is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Average annual incidence of listeriosis in 9 European countries^{*)} in the period 2002 -2006.

Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Incidence rate /10 ⁶ persons ^{*)}	3.6	5.1	5.2	6.0	6.3

^{*)} Belgium, Denmark, England/Wales, Finland, France, Germany, The Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland.

In the period 2002 -2006 the incidence rate increased yearly from 3.6 – 6.3 cases per 10⁶ persons. This increase was not caused by large foodborne outbreaks.

Data from the individual countries

▪ **England and Wales**

In England and Wales an increase occurred in the number of sporadic cases, predominantly in persons over 60 years. The isolated serovars did not change during the study period. The incidence of maternal/neonatal cases also remained unchanged during the study period.

▪ **France**

In France the number of sporadic cases did not change significantly between 2001 and 2005. In 2006 and 2007 the number of cases in persons over 60 years of age increased significantly however. In other age groups the incidence of listeriosis remained stable. The distribution of serovars causing listeriosis in France did not change significantly between 2001 and 2007 (Table 2).

Table 2. The most common serovars involved in listeriosis in France in the period 2001 – 2007

Serovar	percentage
4b	48 - 55
1/2a	22 - 33
1/2b	11 - 22
1/2c	3 - 5
Others	0 - <1

▪ **Germany**

Surveillance data from Germany showed a continuous increase in the number of cases since 2001. In 2005 a steep increase of 72% was observed, although no outbreaks of infection (involving more than 2 persons) were observed. In the period 2001 – 2006 the number of patients over 60 years of age increased by a factor of 2.6 and for patients over 80 years by a factor 4.0.

▪ **The Netherlands**

Due to an intensified surveillance in 2005 the incidence rate of listeriosis increased from 3.0 to 5.6/10⁶ persons. In 2006 the incidence rate declined again to 3.9/10⁶ persons. The authors do not rule out a genuine increase in the number of cases in 2005 in addition to the increase caused by intensified surveillance.

▪ **Denmark**

In Denmark the incidence rate of listeriosis was stable in 2003-2004 at a level of 5.2-5.4 cases/10⁶ persons. Since 2005 however, the incidence rate increased sharply to a level of 10.3 cases/10⁶ persons in 2006. This increase could not be related to the occurrence of an outbreak of listeriosis.

- **Belgium**

In Belgium, the incidence rate was higher than usual in 2003 and 2004 at a level of 7.3 and 8.6 cases/10⁶ persons, compared with an incidence rate of 4.3-5.7 cases/10⁶ persons in previous years. The large increase in 2004 was in all probability caused by an outbreak because the proportion of serovar 1/2 was unusually high (68% of isolates)! In 2005 and 2006 the incidence rate declined again to a level of 5.9-6.4 cases/10⁶ persons.

- **Finland**

In Finland the incidence rate in the period 2003-2006 was much higher (6.7-8.5 cases/10⁶ persons) than in previous years (3.5-5.4 cases/10⁶ persons). The authorities tried to detect clusters of infections by serogenotyping all strains. In 2003 – 2004 two clusters of 7 cases each were thus observed and investigated. In one cluster cold fish products were involved.

Source:

Emerging Infectious Diseases, Vol 14 (2008), nr. 5

<http://www.cdc.gov/eid/content/14/5/734.htm>

Editorial note. The epidemiology of listeriosis in Europe is changing. The absence of large outbreaks suggests that the exposure to foods that allow growth of *L. monocytogenes* may have increased.