



Family Digest 17
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The Listeriosis Outbreak: A Public Health Challenge

The current outbreak of Listeriosis in South Africa is one of the largest ever recorded in the world. It has claimed 180 lives to date, and has resulted in the hospitalization of hundreds more. The disease is caused by the bacterium *Listeria monocytogenes*, which is found in the soil and in vegetation. It can contaminate fresh food, particularly meat products. It is both preventable and treatable with accurate diagnosis and the identification of the source of contamination. It is a notifiable disease.

The symptoms of Listeriosis include nausea, dizziness, fever, stiffness and disorientation. Furthermore, it can cause severe illness, including meningitis, resulting in lifelong harm and even death. Those most at risk of developing severe disease include neonates, the elderly, pregnant women, persons with weak immunity due to HIV, and those suffering from diabetes, cancer, and chronic liver or kidney disease.

While the disease was first identified in January 2017, it would be over a year before the source of the outbreak was identified. In early March the Department of Health announced that the source of the current Listeriosis outbreak had been traced to Enterprise's Polokwane and Germiston meat processing factories. It was successfully traced after several children presented with gastroenteritis and were hospitalised after eating polony at a crèche. Enterprise products and other meat and poultry products processed at these factories have been withdrawn from all major retailers across the country. Tiger Brands, of which Enterprise is a subsidiary, were slow to react to the evidence that there was a direct link between their products and the present outbreak of the disease.

The National Institute for Communicable Diseases has expressed concern that, given the increasingly high cost of food, consumers are relying more on processed meats for their protein, as other meat products have become more expensive. This outbreak shows once again, therefore, that poorer people and families are disproportionately affected by such breakdowns in standards. It also adds weight to the argument that fresh chicken, the cheapest source of animal protein, ought to be zero-rated for VAT.

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