

Mitigating the Risk of Listeria in Cheese Production



What is listeria?

Listeria monocytogenes is a bacteria found naturally in soil that thrives in cold, damp environments. When ingested by humans, it can cause listeriosis, a sickness marked by flu-like symptoms, as well as meningitis and pregnancy complications. In food production, listeria is monitored on finished products, food contact surfaces, and high risk non-food contact surfaces such as cooler walls, floors, and drains. The regulatory agency that monitors listeria depends on the food being produced: USDA monitors for meat and poultry, while FDA monitors for dairy and all other ready to eat foods. Comprehensive information on listeria can be found on the FDA's website at: <https://www.fda.gov/downloads/Food/GuidanceRegulation/GuidanceDocumentsRegulatoryInformation/UCM535981.pdf>

How can the risk of listeria be reduced in cheese production?

The risk of listeria contamination can be reduced by following Good Manufacturing Practices, including strict cleaning and sanitation methods. Employees should be trained on how to avoid cross contamination between ready to eat foods and raw ingredients. Storing equipment in a clean and dry environment also reduces risk. Condensation in refrigerators can harbor listeria, and should be eliminated when possible. Listeria is controlled in a two-step process: cleaning and sanitizing. Once equipment has been cleaned, use bleach or another robust sanitizer, which will kill listeria when used in accordance with manufacturers' instructions. Cheese can be safely aged on wood if the wood is smooth and cleanable, and the surface is sanitized between batches (avoid rough cut wood, knots, or other uneven spots that are difficult to clean).

What is a Listeria Control Program?

A written food safety system is a plan for producing food as safely as possible. If a plan is comprehensive, and followed as written, food borne illness is 100% preventable. For cheesemakers, a Listeria Control Program must be part of their food safety plan. A company's Listeria Control Program must be available to inspectors on site, but does not need to be submitted to the FDA for approval.

A written Listeria Control Program includes:

- Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) that have been signed into action by management,
- Testing Logs
- Chain of Custody forms
- Printed version of the FDA Listeria Guidelines.

For more information, please contact us at info@dirigofoodsafety.com or 207.517.3920