



Binational Border Health Information System ~ Sistema Binacional Fronterizo de Información en Salud

Chihuahua - New Mexico - Texas

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Note / Nota: TDH Warns of Health Hazards from Mexican Cheese

The Texas Department of Health is warning consumers not to eat unpasteurized, soft, white cheese from Mexico illegally sold in the state. The cheese has been linked to listeriosis in six pregnant women and seven babies in South Texas and in the Houston area over the last several months. Two of the babies died.

The cheese, commonly called "queso fresco" or "queso blanco", may contain *Listeria*, a bacterium found in soil and water. TDH officials say the suspect cheese is typically sold in flea markets and by street vendors and that the warning does not apply to pasteurized, properly labeled, soft, white, Mexican cheese sold in reputable stores and markets.

Genetic fingerprint testing by the TDH laboratory in Austin determined that the *Listeria* that caused the infections in the pregnant women and their unborn babies most likely came from the same original source. TDH epidemiologists identified the cheese as the common-denominator food eaten by the mothers.

State and federal regulations require that imported soft cheese be pasteurized, labeled in English and be continuously stored at 45 degrees F or lower.

Most of the suspect cheese is not labeled or is labeled only in Spanish and is usually sold in wedges, chunks or blocks wrapped in cellophane or plastic wrap. Officials believe the imported cheese often is not pasteurized or safely stored. Pasteurization or cooking kills *Listeria*.

Symptoms of listeriosis include fever, muscle aches and sometimes diarrhea or nausea. Headache, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance or convulsions may occur if the infection spreads to the nervous system. The incubation period is usually from 12 hours to three weeks but can be longer.

Healthy adults and children rarely become seriously ill from *Listeria* infection. But pregnant women and people with weakened immune systems are at greater risk.

Pregnant women may only have mild cases of the illness, but infections during pregnancy can lead to premature delivery, miscarriage, stillbirths or babies being born with infections that can be life-threatening.

TDH and Hidalgo County Health Department staff conducted the investigation.

(News media: for more information contact Steve McAndrew, TDH Retail Foods Division, 512-719-0232; Linda Gaul, TDH Infectious Disease Epidemiology and Surveillance Division, 512-458-7676; or Doug McBride, TDH Press Officer, Austin, 512-458-7524.)

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