

# Preventing Listeriosis in Pregnant Hispanic Women in the U.S.

## *Community Educator's Guide To a Serious Foodborne Risk*

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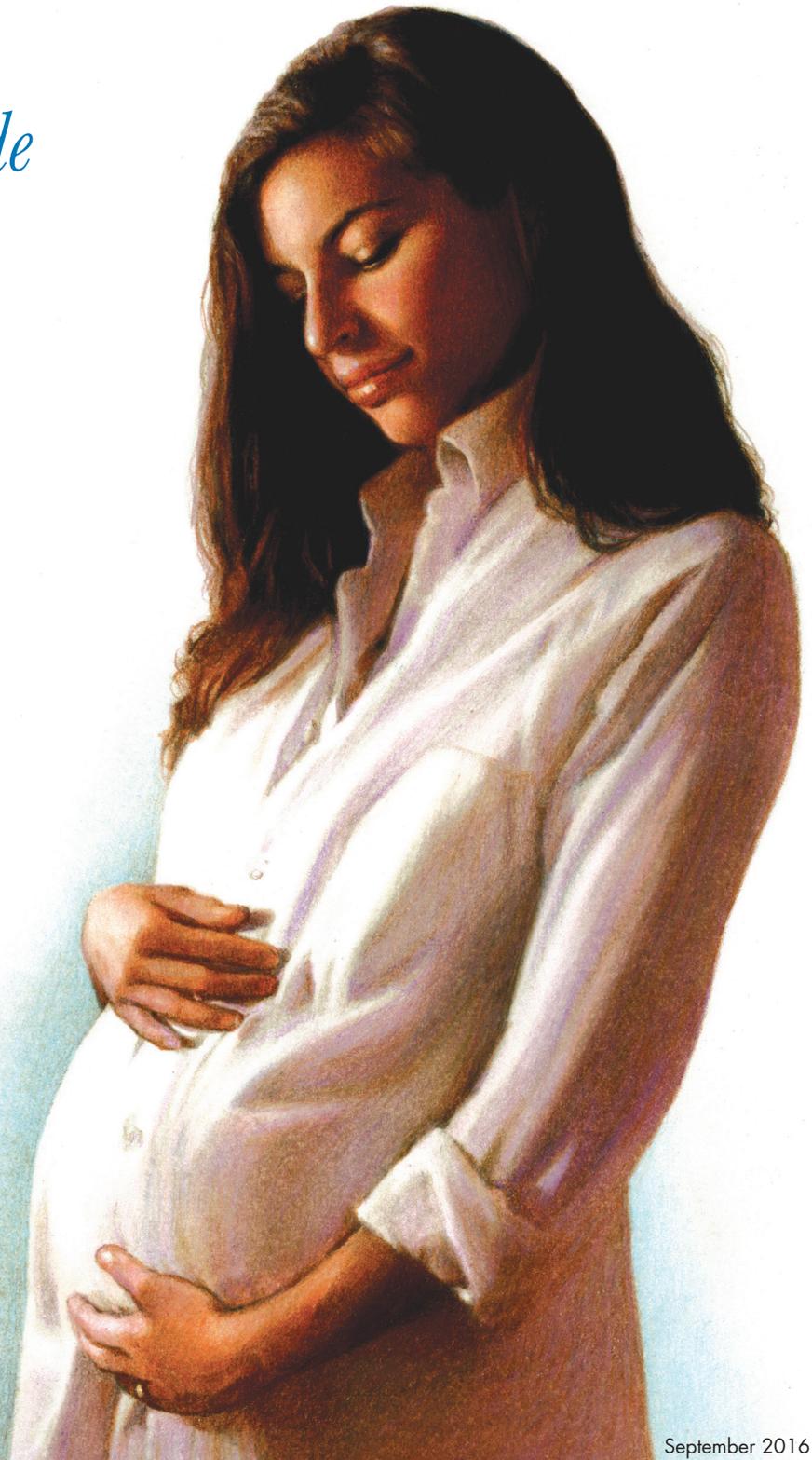
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## Dear Community Educator,

We need your help. You can play a critical role in preventing listeriosis in your community. This foodborne illness is caused by the *Listeria monocytogenes* (“*Listeria*”) bacterium, and eating foods that contain this bacteria can lead to serious illness and even death.

The youngest victim of listeriosis is the **unborn baby** who can become infected even though the mother doesn’t feel sick! The message for pregnant women is simple — never eat dairy products made with unpasteurized milk. Pregnant women should only eat cheese that is labeled “made from pasteurized milk.”

- All **pregnant women are at serious risk** for listeriosis. That’s because their immune systems are altered during pregnancy, so they are less able to fight off the infection.
- **Hispanic pregnant women** are at even greater risk of listeriosis because of traditional dietary habits that lead many women to eat cheese made from unpasteurized milk.
- If a pregnant woman has listeriosis, **her unborn baby can become ill and even die.**

The risk to Hispanic women is much higher than it is for the general population because of the cultural tradition of eating Mexican-style soft cheeses like Queso Fresco, which, in many Latin American countries, are often made from “raw” (unpasteurized) milk. **Most women are simply unaware that cheese made with unpasteurized milk can harbor deadly bacteria!**

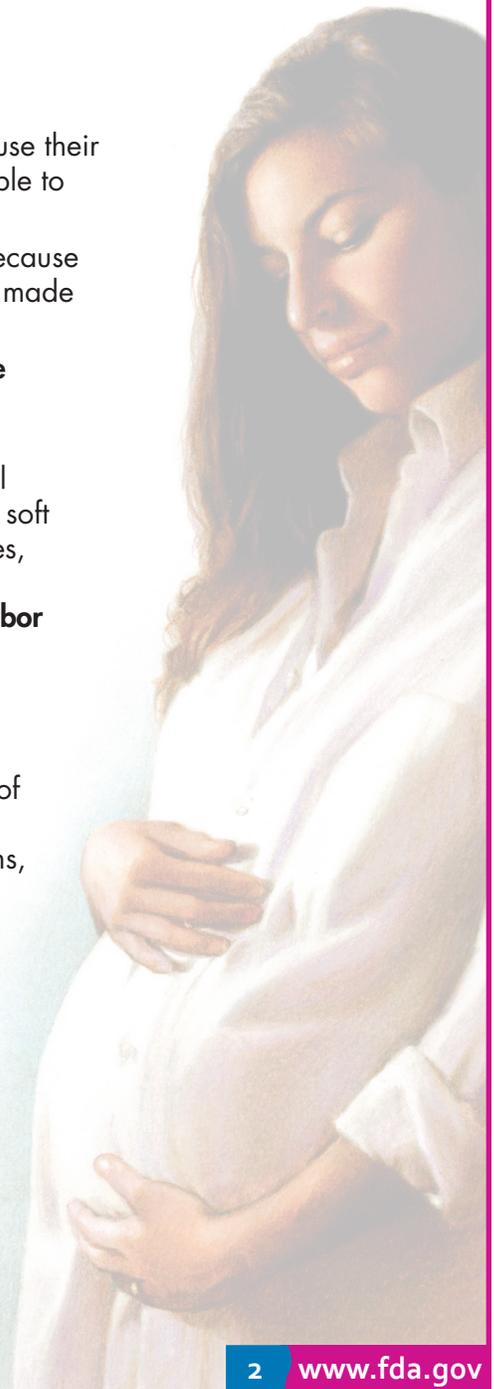
**Preventing Listeriosis Community Educator’s Guide** was created to make it easier for you to spread this important health message throughout your community. The guide includes a variety of handouts to be printed or reproduced and distributed, along with background information for you regarding the disease, its symptoms, and how to prevent it.

Pregnant women need to know that they could be putting their unborn babies at risk. Thank you for alerting the women in your community about this potentially fatal condition.

Sincerely yours,

Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition  
U.S. Food and Drug Administration

*Pregnant Hispanic women in the United States have an elevated risk of becoming infected with Listeria. YOU can help keep these women and their babies safe!*



# using the toolkit

The tools included in the *Preventing Listeriosis* program include the Community Educator's Guide with reproducible handouts, a selection of customizable and noncustomizable media materials, poster, and video (in English and Spanish).

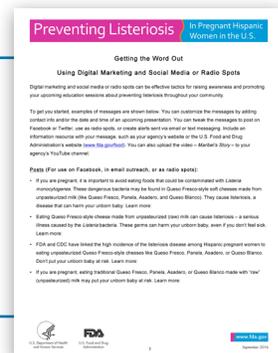
## Community Educator's Guide

- This self-contained guide includes background information, common questions and answers, and a set of printable/reproducible handouts to help you notify your community about listeriosis, a critical health risk.
- The handouts/reproducibles may be used in a variety of settings, including:
  - Group presentations
  - Home visits
  - Displays at community gathering points (see **Get Your Community Involved** on page 5 for location ideas)



### Getting the Word Out Using Social Media or Radio Spots

Use the messages and posts included in the media materials to raise awareness and promote upcoming education sessions you are planning in your community, or as a "drive to site" to your local agency website or FDA's online food safety information.



## Media Materials

The program also includes local media materials, some of which you can customize. These resources may be helpful if you have the opportunity to engage local media in spreading the word about the risk of listeriosis in the Hispanic community.

The materials include:

- Pitch Letter
- Media Q&A
- Media Backgrounder
- Matte Article
- Press Release
- Getting the Word Out
- Glossary of Terms
- Using Digital Marketing and Social Media or Radio Spots



# background information

## About *Listeria* and Listeriosis

### Listeriosis is a Foodborne Illness

Listeriosis is a serious disease caused by eating foods that are contaminated with the *Listeria monocytogenes* (“*Listeria*”) bacterium.

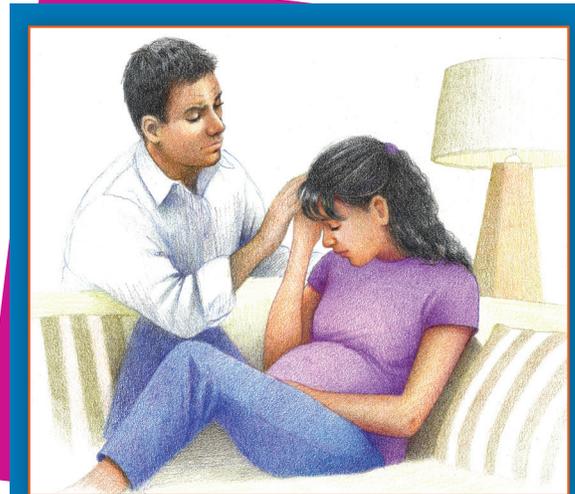
- This germ is commonly found in soil, water, decaying vegetation, and the intestinal tract of animals.
- It can also be found in:
  - Soft cheeses or other products **made from unpasteurized milk**
  - Processed foods that **become contaminated** — such as deli meats
- Unlike many other foodborne bacteria, *Listeria* grows at refrigerator temperatures.

Heat processes like **pasteurization** destroy *Listeria*. For pregnant women, the key is to **avoid cheeses and other foods made from unpasteurized milk**. If a pregnant woman contracts listeriosis, she can suffer severe consequences — including pre-term labor or the loss of her baby.

### Symptoms of Listeriosis

Listeriosis is tricky to detect. Sometimes it causes symptoms; but sometimes a mother may be passing it to her unborn baby without even knowing it because she doesn't feel sick at all.

- **Listeriosis can cause** fever, chills, muscle aches, nausea, diarrhea, or upset stomach. If infection spreads to the nervous system, it can lead to headaches, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance, or convulsions. In extreme cases, death can occur.
- **Even if there are no symptoms in the mother**, the disease can still **severely affect the unborn baby**. It can lead to miscarriage, stillbirth, premature labor, the delivery of a low birthweight infant, a wide range of health problems for a newborn, or even infant death.



Symptoms can occur within a few days or even weeks after eating the contaminated food.

### Treating Listeriosis

Pregnant women (and other people who have weakened immune systems) who believe they are infected should seek medical attention immediately.

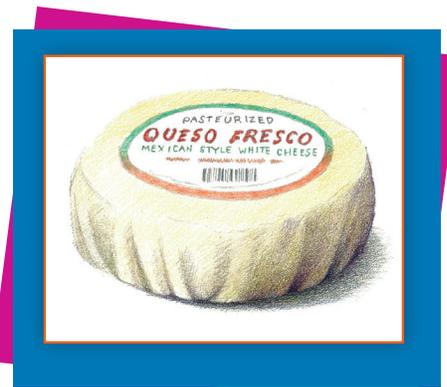
# Educating About Mexican-style Soft Cheeses

## Eating Unpasteurized Cheese Puts Women and Their Babies at Risk

Flavors in foods that are like those from home can be a comfort to a person coming to the United States from another country. But in the case of Mexican-style soft cheeses made from “raw” (unpasteurized) milk, the results can be tragic.

- As some Hispanics immigrate to the United States, their search for authentic tastes from home unknowingly puts them at risk for listeriosis. The most common cause is the eating of Mexican-style soft cheeses like Queso Fresco that have been made with “raw” milk.
- Many types of cheeses can be made in this style, including: **Queso Fresco, Panela, Asadero, and Queso Blanco.**

These soft, white, moist cheeses are a staple in many Hispanic diets. Many feel that it tastes much better made the traditional way with unpasteurized milk. However, what they probably don't realize is that this taste preference puts them at risk — because **unless the milk is pasteurized first, it can carry the bacteria that cause listeriosis!**



## Looking at the Statistics: Hispanic Pregnant Women and Listeriosis

Listeriosis affects people of all races and genders — but **pregnant women** are 10 times more likely than other healthy adults to get listeriosis. Hormonal changes that occur during pregnancy affect the mother's immune system, which leads to greater susceptibility to listeriosis. In addition, pregnant Hispanic women are about 24 times more likely than the general population to get *Listeria* infection. That's why it's critical to get preventive information out to these women.

## Other Risks with Queso Fresco-style Cheeses that Affect All Consumers

Other illnesses that have also been linked to eating unpasteurized cheese include tuberculosis, salmonellosis, and brucellosis. For more information on these threats, visit the FDA website: [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov).

### Alert for Pregnant Women

#### Don't Buy Homemade Cheese Sold Door-to-Door

Aspiring Latino entrepreneurs have been known to purchase raw milk and use it to make homemade cheese, then sell it door-to-door or from an ice chest in their communities. Unlicensed vendors also sell it from carts. Remind women not to purchase or eat this cheese. It could harm their unborn child!

# Preventing Listeriosis

The single most important thing a pregnant Hispanic woman can do to prevent listeriosis is to **avoid eating cheese made from unpasteurized milk**. In addition, there are some general food safety guidelines that can further aid in preventing infection.

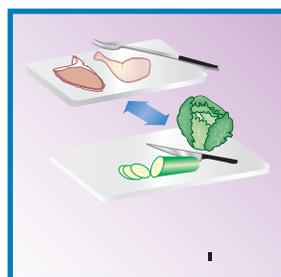
## Four Simple Steps to Prevent Foodborne Illness

These four simple steps can further reduce the likelihood of getting listeriosis and other foodborne illnesses:



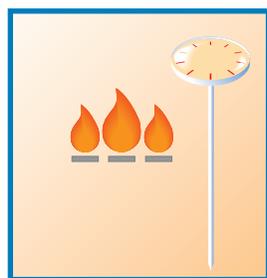
### 1. Clean

- Before, during, and after food preparation, wash hands and kitchen surfaces often with hot water and soap.



### 2. Separate

- Keep raw meats separate from other foods, such as fruits and vegetables.



### 3. Cook

- Thoroughly cook meat, poultry, and seafood.
- Thoroughly cook and reheat food to a safe internal temperature before eating.



### 4. Chill

- Your refrigerator should register at 40°F (4°C) or below. Place a refrigerator thermometer in the refrigerator and check the temperature periodically.
- Store perishable foods that are pre-cooked or ready-to-eat in your refrigerator and eat them as soon as possible.

## For More Information

Visit <http://www.fda.gov/food> (Spanish and English) or call **1-800-SAFEFOOD** (English only) Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. ET (except Thursdays from 12:30 p.m. to 1:30 p.m. and Federal holidays).

Other online resources:

- FDA Education Resource Library — <http://www.fda.gov/educationresourcelibrary>
- <http://www.foodsafety.gov>
- U.S. Partnership for Food Safety Education — <http://www.fightbac.org>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention — <http://www.cdc.gov>
- United States Department of Agriculture — <http://www.usda.gov>

# Q A

## Common Questions and Answers From Pregnant Women About Listeriosis

### Q What is listeriosis?

A It's a serious illness caused by eating food contaminated with *Listeria* bacterium. These germs can affect you and your unborn baby, newborns, and other people whose immune systems may be weakened from cancer, diabetes, and other diseases.

### Q How can I get listeriosis?

A By eating foods that are contaminated with *Listeria* monocytogenes. These dangerous bacteria have been found in Queso Fresco-style soft cheeses and other foods made from unpasteurized milk. *Listeria* bacteria can also be found in processed foods that become contaminated, such as deli meats.

### Q Why am I at risk during pregnancy?

A During pregnancy, parts of your immune system are altered. That's why pregnant women are about 10 times more likely than other healthy adults to get listeriosis. About one in seven (14%) of all cases occur in pregnant women; also at high risk are unborn babies and newborns.

### Q I'm Latina. Am I at greater risk for listeriosis?

A Yes, Latinas are at greater risk for listeriosis because they are more likely to consume cheeses made from unpasteurized milk than non-Latina women are. Latinas are also more likely to purchase and eat homemade Mexican-style soft cheeses from local vendors — and these

cheeses are often made with unpasteurized milk. Many cases of listeriosis within Hispanic communities have been linked to eating homemade cheeses. Pregnant Hispanic women are about 24 times more likely than the general population to get *Listeria* infection.

### Q I've never known anyone who had this happen to her. Why should I worry?

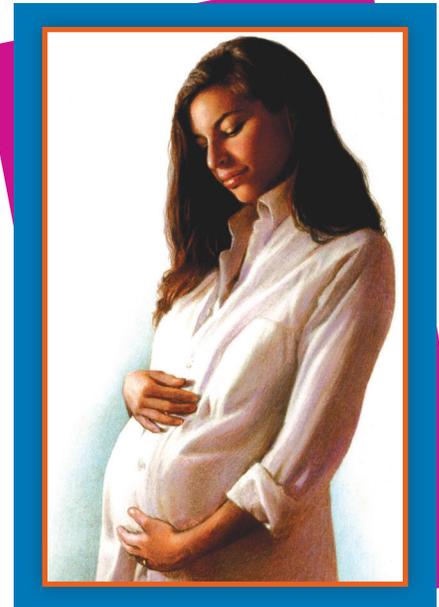
A It's very possible that someone you know has lost a baby because of listeriosis, and it just wasn't diagnosed.

### Q What are the symptoms of listeriosis?

A You may experience fever, chills, muscle aches, nausea, diarrhea, or upset stomach. Or, you may not feel sick at all — yet the infection can still severely affect your unborn baby. Listeriosis can lead to miscarriage, stillbirth, premature labor, the delivery of a low birthweight infant, a wide range of health problems for a newborn, or even infant death. If infection spreads to the nervous system, headaches, stiff neck, confusion, loss of balance, or convulsions can occur. In extreme cases, death can occur.

### Q How long does it take to get symptoms?

A After eating contaminated cheese made from unpasteurized milk, the symptoms can take a few days or even weeks to appear. If you think you have been exposed, you should see a doctor immediately.



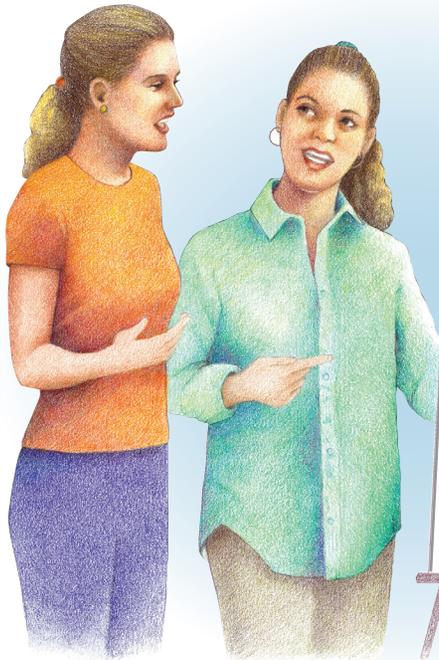
### Q How can listeriosis be treated?

A Your doctor may prescribe antibiotics that are safe to use during pregnancy. Antibiotics may also be given to your baby if he/she is born with listeriosis.

### Q How can I prevent listeriosis?

A The most important thing to do is to avoid eating Mexican-style Queso Fresco cheese, including Queso Fresco, Panela, Asadero, or Queso Blanco made from unpasteurized milk. Do not eat this type of cheese unless it is commercially processed and the label says that it is made with pasteurized milk. Never buy cheese sold door-to-door or from an unlicensed street vendor — chances are it is made from raw (unpasteurized) milk.

## Attention Pregnant Women!



### Attention Pregnant Women:

Do not eat these Mexican-style soft cheeses unless you're sure they are made from pasteurized milk:

- Asadero
- Panela
- Queso Blanco
- Queso Fresco

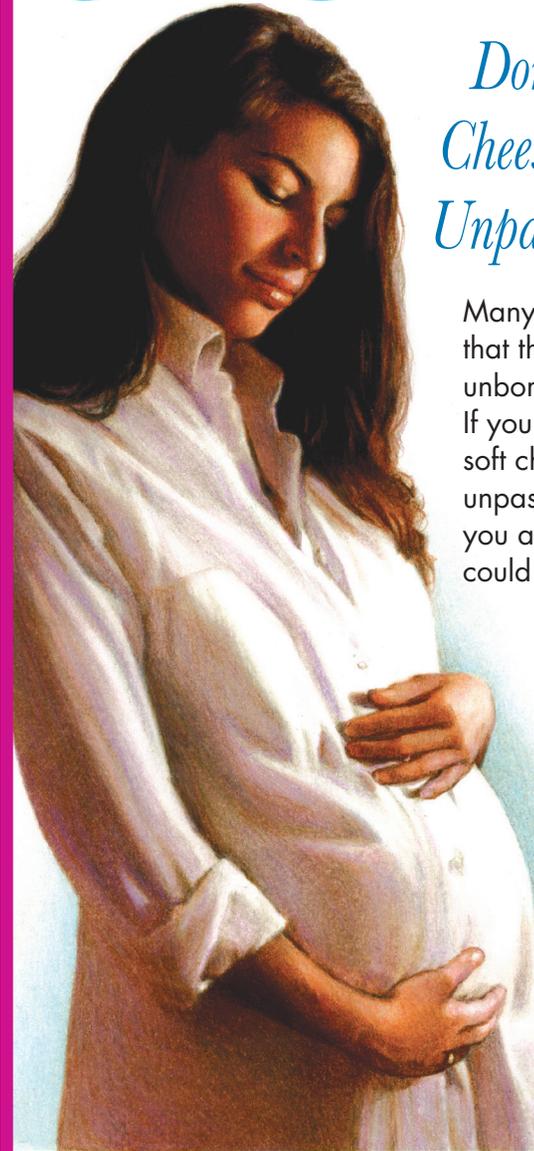
**Read the Label!**



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# Keep Your Unborn Baby Safe



## *Don't Eat Some Cheeses Made from Unpasteurized Milk*

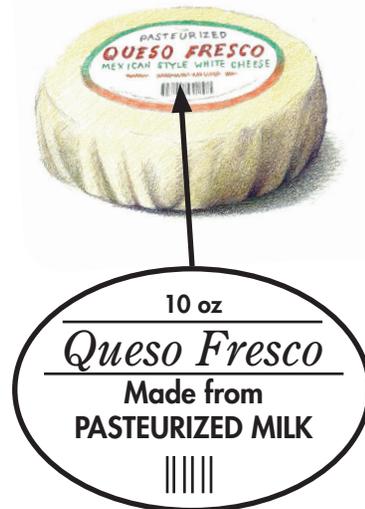
Many women don't realize that they are putting their unborn babies at risk. If you eat Mexican-style soft cheeses made from unpasteurized milk while you are pregnant, you could harm your baby!

## Some Cheeses Could Harm Your Unborn Baby!

Some cheeses made from raw or “unpasteurized” milk can contain bacteria that might make your baby sick — even before he or she is born.

- “Queso Fresco” is a **Mexican-style soft cheese** that is sometimes made with unpasteurized milk. **Many types of cheeses** are made Queso Fresco-style. These include Queso Fresco, Panela, Asadero, and Queso Blanco.
- These unpasteurized cheeses are often sold door-to-door, sold by unlicensed street vendors, or brought into the United States from Mexico or Latin America.

**Before eating any of these soft Mexican-style cheeses**, check the label to make sure it says “Made from Pasteurized Milk.” If it doesn’t — **do not eat it.**



## Eating Cheese from Unpasteurized Milk Can Cause Listeriosis and Other Diseases

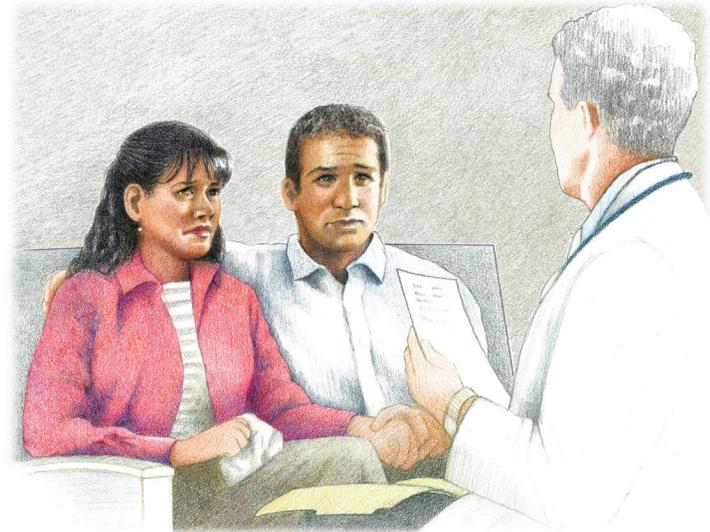
- **Listeria** is a bacterium that causes a disease called listeriosis. It can cause birth defects and other serious problems — even the death of your baby.
  - Other diseases that have also been linked to eating cheese made from unpasteurized milk include:
    - Tuberculosis
    - Salmonellosis
    - Brucellosis
  - Symptoms of listeriosis can include:
    - fever
    - chills
    - muscle aches
    - upset stomach
    - nausea
    - diarrhea
- Or, there may be no symptoms at all!

### If You're Concerned That You've Eaten Contaminated Cheese While Pregnant:

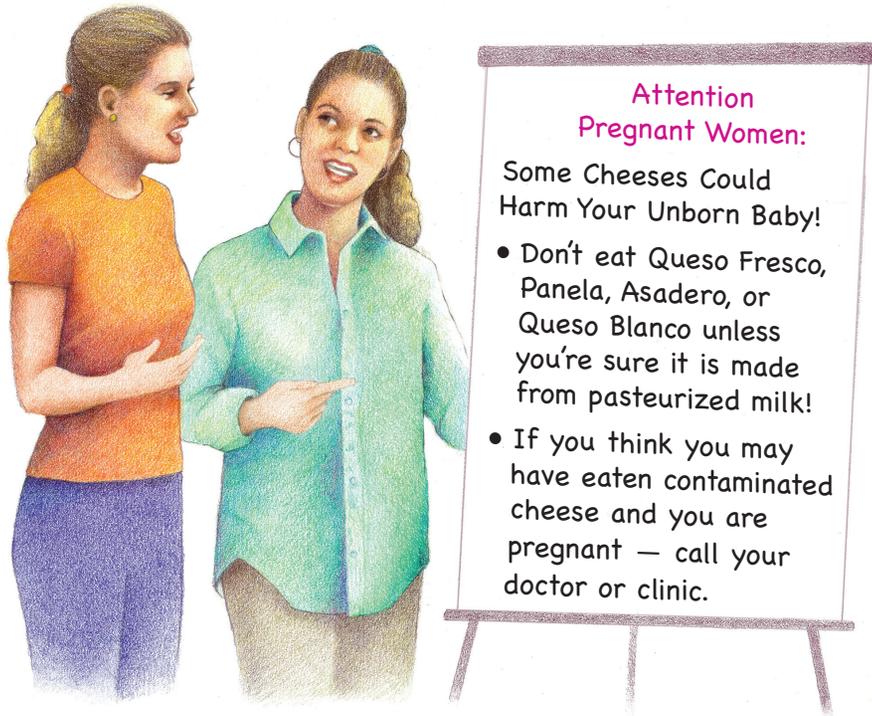
- Call your doctor or clinic right away
- Your doctor may prescribe antibiotics that are safe to take during pregnancy

### What does “Unpasteurized” Mean?

- Unpasteurized milk is not heated at a processing plant to kill bacteria.
- Unpasteurized (raw) milk can contain dangerous bacteria that can hurt or kill your unborn baby — even if you don't feel sick!



**Rosario:** I know. But what happened to Maribel and Hector need not occur for others if pregnant women avoid eating cheese made from unpasteurized milk. But in Maribel's case, it was too late.



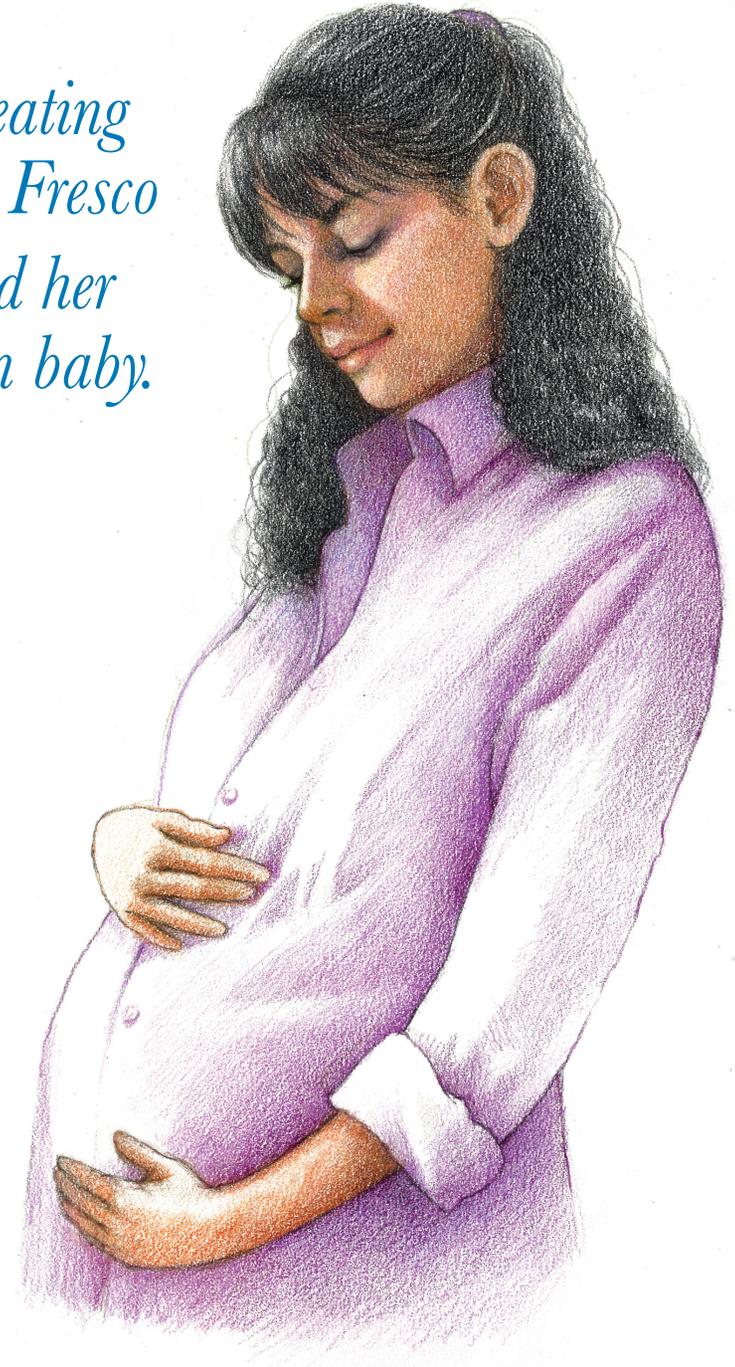
**Cristina:** Maribel's story makes me so sad. But one important thing we can do is tell other people about this — especially friends who are pregnant, and their families.

**Rosario:** That's right. Hector and Maribel have been spreading the word, too. They believe that one good thing that can come from this terrible tragedy is to prevent it from happening to anyone else.

**Cristina:** You can count on me to help spread the word.

# Maribel's Story

*How eating Queso Fresco harmed her unborn baby.*



## Introducing



**Cristina**



**Rosario**



**Hector**



**Maribel**

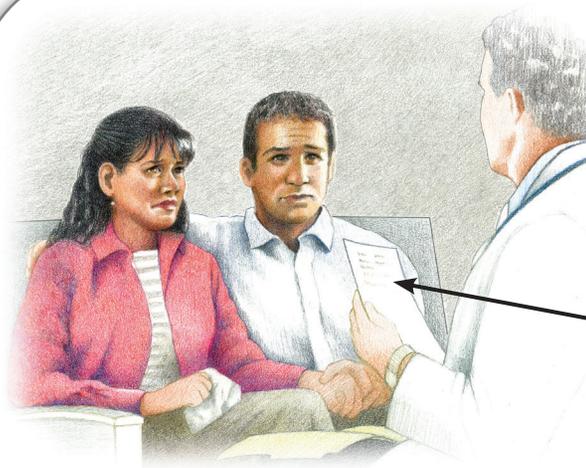
For questions about the information in this publication, contact:

U.S. Food and Drug Administration  
5001 Campus Drive  
College Park, MD 20740



**FDA** U.S. FOOD & DRUG  
ADMINISTRATION

[www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)



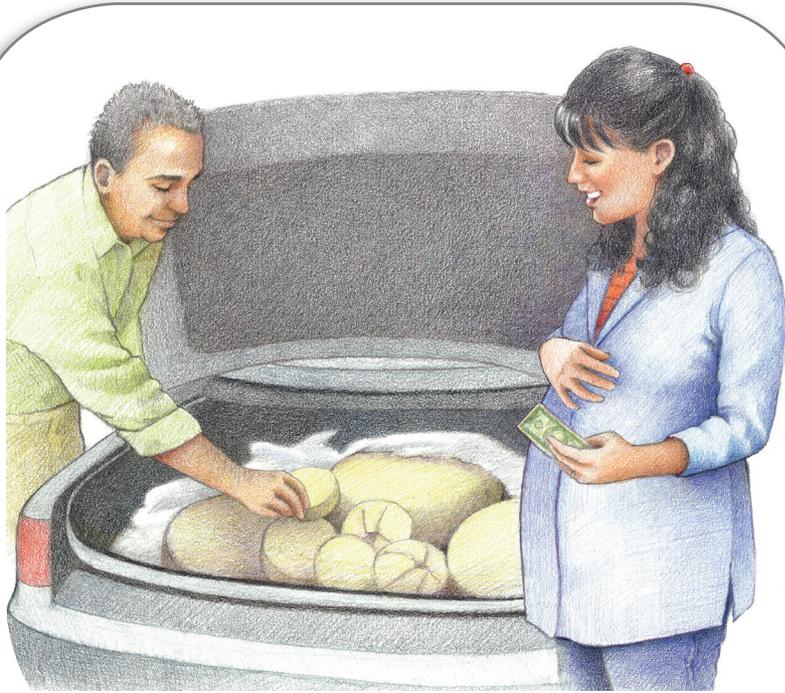
Do not eat Queso Fresco-style cheese: Queso Fresco, Panela, Queso Blanco, or Asadero, if made from unpasteurized milk.

**Dr. Nieves:** I'm sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Sanchez. Your baby was stillborn. She died from an infection called listeriosis. You passed this infection onto your baby without even knowing it.

You can get infected with the bacteria from eating Queso Fresco cheese made from unpasteurized milk. There are several types of Queso Fresco-style cheeses that might be unpasteurized and pregnant women shouldn't eat them.

**Rosario:** Unfortunately, like many Latina women who crave the taste of Queso Fresco cheese from home, Maribel didn't know to look for the "pasteurization" label — and because of that, her unborn baby got sick and died. Dr. Nieves said that the symptoms of listeriosis can include fever, chills, muscle aches, upset stomach, nausea, and diarrhea. But then, Dr. Nieves also said that it's very common for a pregnant woman to have listeriosis and not even know it because she doesn't feel sick. That's why it's so important to avoid eating cheese made from unpasteurized milk or cheese made from unknown sources.

**Cristina:** Wow — that is scary! Poor Maribel and Hector.



**Maribel:** Wow — Queso Fresco just like in Mexico!

**Gonzalo - Vendor:** I make it myself — like my dad used to make back home. I get raw milk straight from a local farmer. There's nothing like it in the stores in the United States.



**Maribel:** I crave the taste of homemade Queso Fresco like I remember from home. I'll take two packages. Thank you!

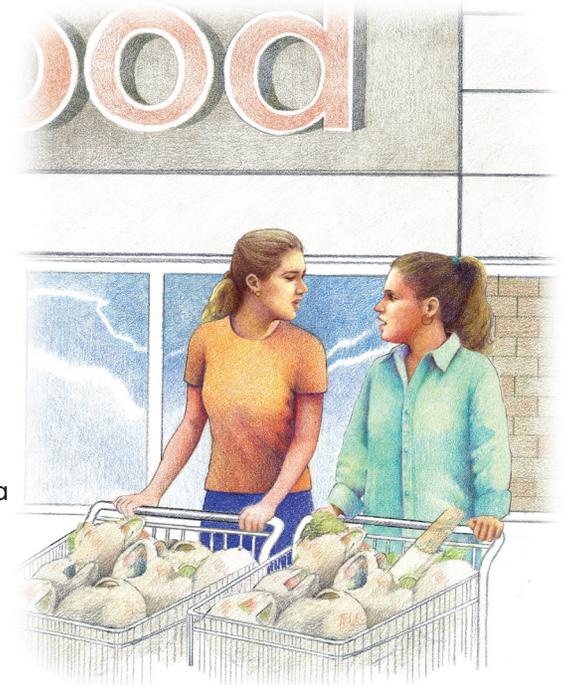


**Rosario:** Maribel didn't know to ask, but the cheese she bought was not made with pasteurized milk.

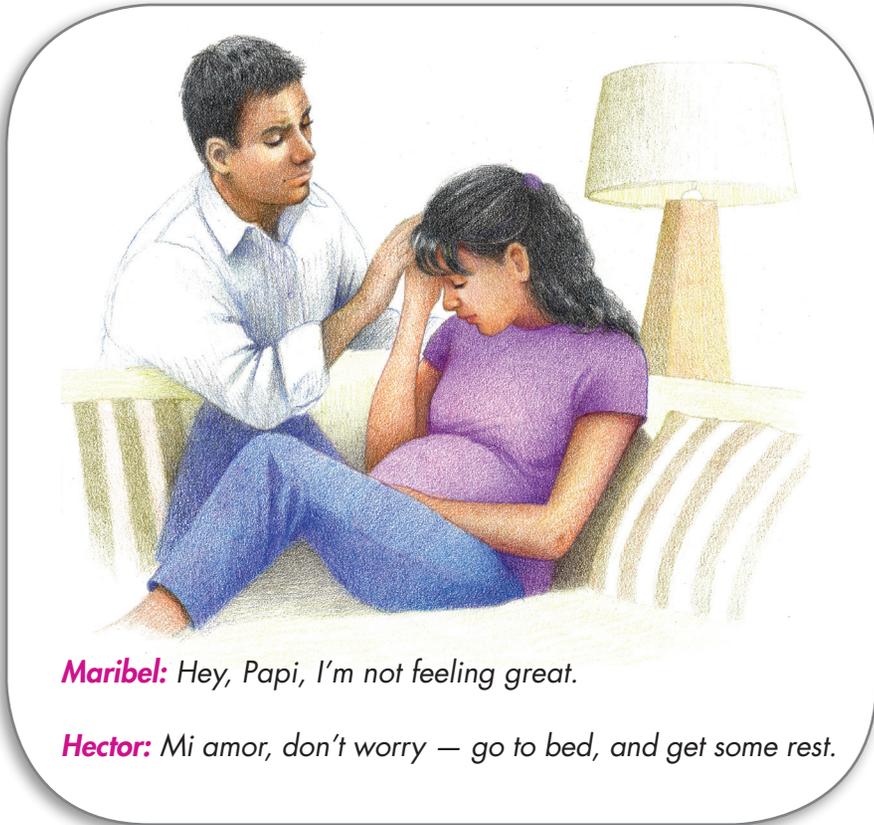
**Cristina:** What does this mean, "pasteurized"?

**Rosario:** When cheese is made from pasteurized milk, it means that the milk used to make the cheese has been processed to kill bacteria. See, look at this label — "Made from Pasteurized Milk."

**Rosario:** Unfortunately, this was not the case with the cheese Maribel bought. It hadn't been pasteurized to kill bacteria. All she wanted was to eat cheese that tasted like the kind made in Mexico — but instead, the Queso Fresco she bought from the door-to-door vendor was contaminated with bacteria called *Listeria*.



**Rosario:** For awhile, Maribel felt fine. But then, she started to feel sick ...



**Maribel:** Hey, Papi, I'm not feeling great.

**Hector:** Mi amor, don't worry — go to bed, and get some rest.

**Rosario:** But several days passed and Maribel didn't feel any better. Her husband Hector started to worry. Finally, one night he convinced her to go to the hospital.

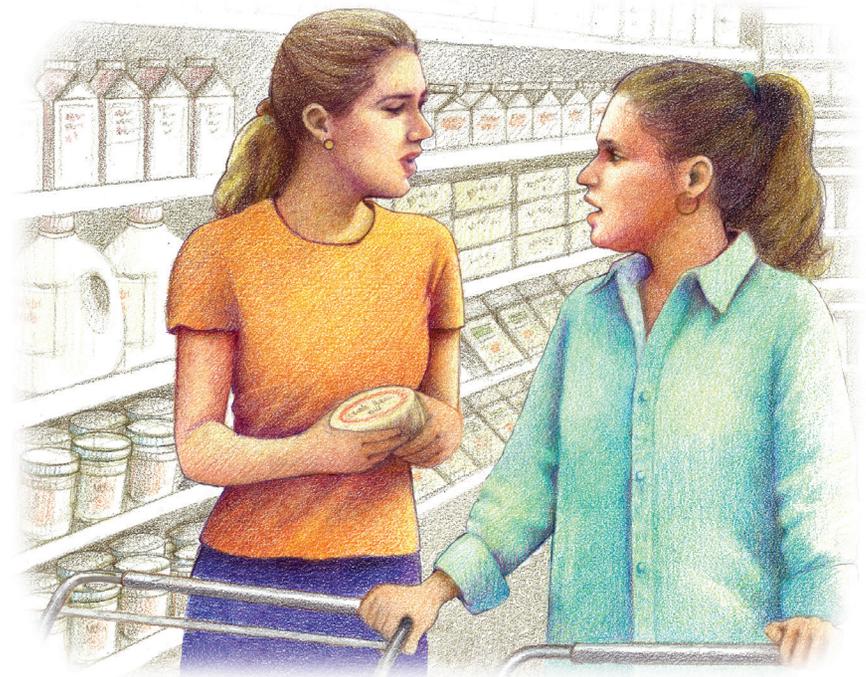
**Cristina:** What happened?

**Rosario:** She lost her baby. It turns out that she had gotten an infection called listeriosis and she passed it to her baby without knowing it.

**Cristina:** Oh, no. She lost the baby because of bacteria from the cheese?

**Cristina:** Oh look, they have Queso Fresco here. But it doesn't taste the same as the kind we used to eat in Mexico. Remember how our mothers would buy the milk fresh from the dairy farm and make the cheese at home?

**Rosario:** Yes, I remember. But eating Queso Fresco like we used to isn't worth the risk — especially after the tragedy that happened to my neighbor Maribel.



**Cristina:** A tragedy? What happened?

**Rosario:** Oh, it's so sad — I thought you heard. Maribel ate Queso Fresco she bought from a vendor selling cheese door-to-door ...

# Attention Pregnant Women

## *Some Cheeses Could Harm Your Unborn Baby!*

**Don't eat Queso Fresco, Panela, Asadero, or Queso Blanco unless you're sure it is pasteurized.**

Cheeses made from raw or "unpasteurized" milk can contain bacteria that might make your baby sick — even before he or she is born.

You can help keep your baby safe by avoiding cheeses made from unpasteurized milk. Here's what you need to know:

- "Queso Fresco" is a Mexican-style soft cheese that is sometimes made with unpasteurized milk. Many types of cheeses can be made "Queso Fresco"- style — including Queso Fresco, Panela, Asadero, and Queso Blanco.
- Unpasteurized cheeses are often sold door-to-door, at flea markets, from the back of trucks, or brought into the United States from Mexico or Latin America.
- Before eating any of these soft Mexican-style cheeses, read the label to make sure it says "Made from Pasteurized Milk," or "Pasteurized." If it doesn't — do not eat the cheese.
- If you think you may have eaten contaminated cheese while pregnant, call your doctor or clinic.



### What Does "Pasteurized" Mean?

- Pasteurized means that a food, like milk, is heated at a processing plant to kill bacteria.
- Unpasteurized (raw) milk has not been heated at a processing plant, and may contain dangerous bacteria that can hurt or kill your unborn baby — even if you don't feel sick!

### Eating Unpasteurized Cheeses Can Cause Listeriosis

- This dangerous disease can cause miscarriage and other serious problems — even the death of your baby.

### Unpasteurized Cheese Can Cause Other Diseases, Too

These have been known to include:

- Tuberculosis
- Salmonellosis
- Brucellosis

*Help Keep Your Unborn Baby Safe. Do not eat Queso Fresco-style cheeses made with unpasteurized milk.*



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