Perry Johnson Registrars Food Safety, Inc.

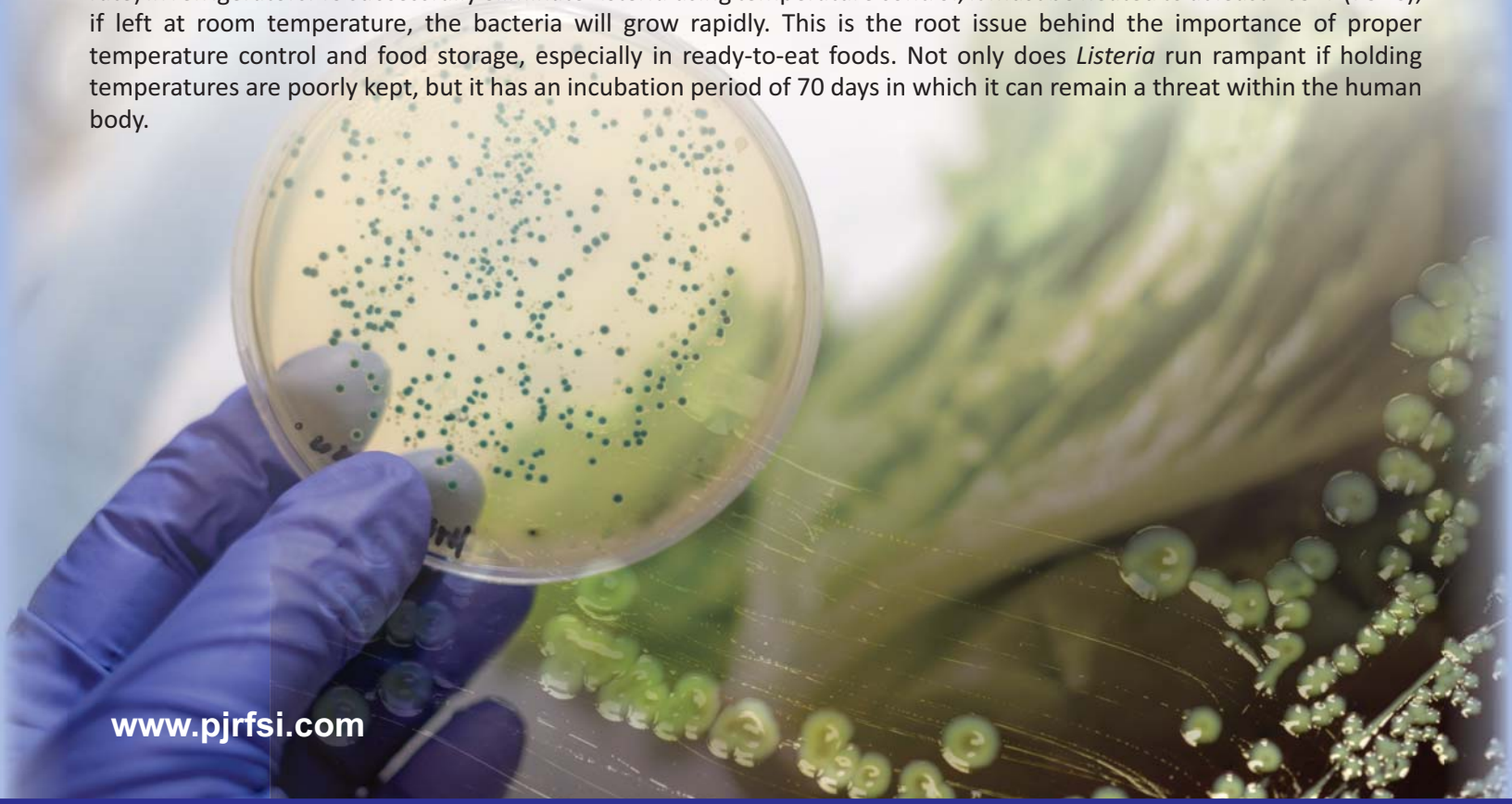
Listeria: Protecting Consumer Health & Peace of Mind

Among the wide range of threats to consumer health and safety that exist, *Listeria* is among the most commonly-cited in the cause of recalls and breaking news headlines. While the CDC estimates approximately 1,600 people contract *Listeriosis* (the infection caused by *Listeria monocytogenes*) annually among the roughly 43 million foodborne illnesses recorded annually, it's the vulnerability of those who are most susceptible to *Listeriosis* that makes the bacteria so dangerous.

In fact, FDA research points out that pregnant individuals are a whopping 18 times more likely to contract a *Listeriosis* infection than those who are not, and about 16-27% of all *Listeriosis* cases are in pregnant women. In addition to the health concerns for the mother, *Listeriosis* poses an especially large threat to the unborn child in question; 20-30% of pregnant women who contract an infection will miscarry due to the illness.

The elderly or immunocompromised are likewise vulnerable to *Listeria*. In healthy populations, the body's own immune system has a strong chance of fighting off *Listeria monocytogenes* before infection can take hold. However, in cases where a large amount of the bacterium is consumed via contaminated, improperly-managed food, anyone can be at risk.

Listeria is unique among commonly-known bacteria for its ability to survive freezing temperatures and grow (at a reduced rate) in refrigerators. To successfully eliminate *Listeria* using temperature control, it must be heated to at least 165*F (73*C); if left at room temperature, the bacteria will grow rapidly. This is the root issue behind the importance of proper temperature control and food storage, especially in ready-to-eat foods. Not only does *Listeria* run rampant if holding temperatures are poorly kept, but it has an incubation period of 70 days in which it can remain a threat within the human body.



With such a lengthy incubation time and specific treatment requirements, what can be done by producers, packagers, and other industry players to ensure consumer protection?

Stamping *Listeria* out as early as possible in the production process is essential, using heat and/or sanitization measures wherever possible. *Listeria* outbreaks that make headlines usually stem from a small series of errors in cleaning systems or routines; thus facilities must regularly review and monitor their strategies to avoid contamination or an opportunity for bacteria to develop. In scenarios such as food preparation in restaurants, avoiding cross-contamination is key. Designating areas for ready-to-eat foods as well as raw products that may be a source of bacteria prior to cooking may help mitigation efforts in tandem with regular cleaning and sanitization.

Aside from preventative measures, a thorough and continual testing program should also be implemented to avoid pathogens entering the food supply. Wash water testing, swabbing, random sampling – every effort to detect any trace of *Listeria* should be undertaken to avoid sickening consumers.

Supply chain control and traceability can be another excellent tool in a manufacturer's arsenal. To protect the public at large from sickness or concern, it is imperative for companies to maintain records of testing done at facilities further up the supply chain to help monitor incoming sources of *Listeria.*

To learn more about how food safety certification may help develop systems to prevent an outbreak of or recall due to *Listeria*, visit **www.pjrfsi.com**. For more information on *Listeriosis* and avoiding infection, visit **www.cdc.gov/listeria/index.html**.