

Publication		
SATURDAY STAR		
Page	Date	AVE (ZAR)
4	Sat 17 Mar 2018	18683.32



‘Urgent need’ for microbiological regulations in SA

MICHAEL ACOTT

LEADING food safety expert Dr Lucia Anelich says the listeriosis outbreak in South Africa has shown the urgent need for appropriate microbiological regulations for processed meats.

In an explanation about *Listeria* and listeriosis, she highlights that South Africa has no enforceable regulation on the maximum amount of *Listeria monocytogenes* permitted in ready-to-eat (RTE) foods.

As a result, many food-processing companies seek instead to abide by international regulations.

L monocytogenes is the bacterium that, when present at high levels in food, can result in the disease listeriosis.

It can grow in cold conditions, but is killed by cooking and pasteurisation.

The government has identified a strain of *Lmonocytogenes* as the cause of the listeriosis outbreak in this country.

“Unfortunately, while South Africa has strict regulations on Salmonella and *E coli*, there is no set maximum for the amount of *L monocytogenes* that is permitted in RTE food,” she says.

“There is only a guideline – the SA National Standard (SANS) 885 for processed meats.

“This guideline is voluntary and is not an enforceable regulation,” Anelich says.

“Many South African food processors therefore seek to abide by international regulations and requirements on *L monocytogenes*.

“Given the recent outbreak of listeriosis, the Department of Health should regard developing appropriate micro-

biological regulations for processed meats as an urgent priority.”

Anelich says *L monocytogenes* is present nearly everywhere in the environment – in soil and water, rotting vegetation, in our gardens and similar places.

It can therefore be expected realistically in or on crops (fruit and vegetables) that are grown in the field and on animals and poultry that are reared in the same environment in which *L monocytogenes* lives naturally.

In low numbers, it is not regarded as a threat to human health, but at high levels it becomes a risk to humans, particularly the elderly, infants, pregnant women and those with compromised immune systems.

“There is no set maximum for the amount of *Listeria*”

“*L monocytogenes* can contaminate fruit and vegetables, meat and dairy products. That is why hygiene is so important whenever food is stored,

processed, prepared or sold,” Anelich says.

“In this outbreak in South Africa, environmental health officials have been taking samples of products and of food processing plants and surrounding areas.

“According to the Department of Health, these tests have found the presence of *L monocytogenes* in some food-processing plants and the vicinity.

“In fact, it would be surprising if the bacteria were not present, given the fact that they are found almost everywhere, including in raw materials such as chicken and other meats.

“It is important to prevent the organism from contaminating the food product, particularly after it has been cooked.”



Enterprise processed meat products have tested positive for listeriosis.