



## LISTERIA FACT SHEET - 22 MARCH 2018

### LISTERIOSIS OUTBREAK

- Listeria is commonly found in soil and water and is easily transferred to surfaces in homes and buildings. It can cause food-borne diseases when present at high concentrations. It thrives in low temperatures, such as refrigeration, but is killed by cooking. Raw foods and vegetables should be washed thoroughly before eating.
- In a media statement dated 4 March 2018, the Department of Health (DoH) has concluded that the source of the recent outbreak of listeriosis was from a production facility in Polokwane and has identified the ST6 listeria strain as the "outbreak strain". This facility is not owned by RCL FOODS.
- In the same statement, DoH announced that RCL FOODS polony product samples from trade have tested positive for *Listeria monocytogenes* (L.mono), but not the ST6 strain.
- DoH had also announced that environmental swabs they have taken from the RCL FOODS polony production facility in Wolwehoek showed existence of L.mono in the plant. Of the 27 environmental swabs (14%) that tested positive for L.mono, 26 were in a pre-cooking (low-risk) area, where raw chicken is handled. One was found in the high-risk area, in a crack on the floor.
- RCL FOODS received the DOH report on the sequencing of the environmental swabs on 22 March 2018. The report stated the following: Out of 27 samples, 20 samples were clear of the L.mono ST6 strain. The remaining 7 were found to be not positive for L.mono and thus not ST6.
- The tests conducted by an independent laboratory in France have confirmed that the Wolwehoek plant is clear of the ST6 listeria strain.

### PRODUCT RECALL

- RCL FOODS has recalled all its polony products as a precautionary measure from its entire customer base and closed the Wolwehoek plant, while government investigations continue.
- 100% affected products were removed from shelves. Product upliftment from the trade is still in progress. A product disposal protocol has been confirmed with government and used to destroy recalled product.
- Rainbow polony products can be returned to the store where the product was purchased for a full refund.
- The halaal status of Rainbow products has not been affected by the recall. All our products remain halaal certified by the MJC.
- The recall concerns only Rainbow polony. All other Rainbow Chicken products produced at our other plants are not subject to this recall.
- The DoH media statement dated, 16 March, noted the following: "We wish to remind the public that the announcement we made about Listeriosis does not relate to frozen or fresh chicken. This includes frozen or fresh chicken produced by RCL FOODS. Our message is clear – chicken products that need to be cooked (like frozen chicken , chicken nuggets, soups, eggs, etc.) are not included in the recall and do not pose a risk provided that they are handled properly and cooked properly".





## SAFETY MEASURES

- Listeria, being an environmental pathogen, can be expected to be found nearly everywhere; therefore it can be expected to enter the processing environment through raw materials, water supply and personnel. Dr Lucia Anelich, a leading food safety expert in South Africa, states that it would in fact “be surprising if the bacteria were not present [in a processing environment], given the fact that they are found almost everywhere, including raw materials such as chicken and other meats”. Given this fact, it is essential for production plants to have adequate processes and procedures to ensure that the bacteria is not present in the finished food product.
- Food safety has always been of paramount importance to RCL FOODS. For over a decade we have utilised internationally recognised and independently verified quality and food safety systems such as FSSC (Food Safety System Certification) 22000 and ISO 22000 in our facilities, which ensure that controls are in place for the mitigation of all food safety risks, including microbiological risks.
- RCL FOODS has voluntary targets based on the stringent European Commission (EC) Regulation No 2073/2005, which specifies “ABSENT” L.mono in a 25g sample of product at production facility and a maximum of 100cfu/g during its shelf life in trade. This itself exceeds the current South African National Standard (SANS) 885/2011 guidance of <100 cfu/g on final product.

## TEST PROCEDURE AND RESULTS

- All our internal and external product tests for the last five years, including our retention samples that match 4 out of 5 batches of the trade samples tested by the DoH, show that our product is clear of L.mono, driven by the stringent controls in place in our production processes.

### **Environmental tests :**

- Referring to the sampling done by the DoH team at Wolwehoek and the final sequence report, 20 environmental swabs (10% of 200) tested positive for L.mono. 19 of these were found in a low risk pre-cooking area where listeria can be expected to be found (since chicken and other raw materials are grown in an environment where listeria occurs naturally). One positive was found in a high risk area, in a crack in the floor.
- As a food company with a strong commitment to food safety and consumer health, this is one too many and we have embarked on a major renovation and cleaning programme to mitigate any presence of L.mono in the high risk area and significantly reduce the likelihood of its presence in the low risk area of the plant. We are working closely with the government on an aligned action plan to re-open our plant.
- Both DOH and independent test results from a laboratory in France confirmed that our Wolwehoek plant is clear of the ST6 listeria strain.

### **Product tests:**

- The DoH tested product samples taken from several retail outlets and found 13 positives from one particular store and one positive from a second store. The product





was only tested for detection of L.mono and not enumeration. Enumeration would enable confirmation of acceptable levels as recommended by SANS 885 and EC 2073/2005.

- We traced these positive samples back to five production batches at our plant, and four of these matched our retention samples. We then sent these four retention samples for testing and they all came back clear of L.mono, suggesting that most likely the contamination happened outside of our plant. The fact that 13 positives were taken at one particular store is a strong indicator that trade cross-contamination needs to be investigated as a priority.
- The DoH team also took five product samples from our plant, of which two were tested by Food Consulting Services (FCS), and three were tested by National Health Laboratory Services (NHLS). All five samples indicated that product was clear of L.mono.
- Product testing has been done regularly at the plant for the last five years and results consistently indicated that our product is clear of L.mono.

#### **MICROBIOLOGICAL REGULATIONS**

- RCL FOODS is committed to working with the government to do whatever is necessary to ensure that food safety requirements are reviewed and clear regulations are drafted on measures to manage listeria across the food provision spectrum. RCL FOODS believes a key focus area should be ready-to-eat foods (including processed meats), where currently no regulations exist.
- Because of the presence of bacteria almost everywhere, worldwide standards are such that governments allow typically maximum of a 100 cfu/g of L.mono in the final product within its shelf life. These levels are considered to be safe.
- In SA, the processed meat industry mostly make use of the voluntary guidelines SANS (South African National standard) 885, which also allows for maximum 100 cfu/g in final product.

