



Raw Milk Factsheet

What is Raw Milk?

Raw milk is any milk that has not been pasteurized. Pasteurization is the process of heating milk to kill disease-causing germs, including harmful bacteria, viruses and parasites. Before most milk in the U.S. was pasteurized, raw milk was a common source of foodborne illness.

What are the Risks of Consuming Raw Milk?

Raw milk and products made from raw milk, including soft cheese, ice cream and yogurt, can be contaminated with germs that can cause serious illness, hospitalization or death.

Milk can become contaminated in many ways, including from cows' excrement or skin, germs in the environment, or if the cow has a disease such as tuberculosis.

Harmful germs that have been linked to raw milk outbreaks include *Campylobacter*, *E. coli*, *Salmonella* and *Listeria*. Pasteurization can kill these germs and prevent disease.

People who get ill from raw milk might suffer from diarrhea, stomach cramping and vomiting. Some people might develop severe or even life-threatening diseases, including Guillain Barre' syndrome which can cause paralysis or hemolytic uremic syndrome which can lead to kidney failure or death.

People most at risk for severe foodborne illness are adults 65 years and older, children younger than age 5 and people with weakened immune systems. But healthy people of any age can get ill after drinking raw milk that is contaminated. The presence of germs in raw milk is unpredictable and even people that have been drinking raw milk for a long time without getting sick, can get sick if they consume contaminated milk.

Did you know?

Pasteurization has the name of the French scientist Louis Pasteur, whose work in the 1880s showed that heating would render undesirable microbes inactive.

Routine pasteurization of milk began in the United States in the 1920s and became widespread by 1950 which led to dramatic reductions in the number of people getting sick.

Most public health professionals and health care providers consider pasteurization to be one of public health's most effective food safety interventions ever!

What if the Farm has Safety Practices and Healthy Animals?

The use of good hygiene practices can reduce risk but does not eliminate the chance of milk contamination. Germs that are harmful to people thrive in the environment of dairy farms. Healthy animals can carry these germs. Even if the farm and barns are kept clean and the farmers are careful when milking, these germs can contaminate raw milk. Methods for collecting milk have improved over the years but cannot be relied on to be sure milk is safe to drink. Raw milk from “certified,” “organic,” or “local” dairies is not guaranteed to be safe. Pasteurization makes milk safe to drink.

Even testing isn’t a guarantee that raw milk is free from harmful germs. While testing one batch of a farm’s raw milk may not yield harmful germs, the next batch may contain harmful germs. Additionally, tests do not always detect low levels of contamination. Germs that may go undetected in raw milk at initial testing can multiply between the time the milk is tested and the time people are drinking it.

How Many Outbreaks are Related to Raw Milk?

Between 2013 and 2018, there were 75 outbreaks of illness reported to the CDC linked to raw milk. These outbreaks included 675 illnesses and 98 hospitalizations. Most of the outbreaks were caused by *Campylobacter*, *Shiga toxin-producing E. coli* or *Salmonella*.

Many raw milk outbreaks involve people 19 years of age or younger. At least one person younger than age 19 was involved in 48% of the raw milk outbreaks reported to the CDC between 2013 and 2018. Of the 74 outbreaks that occurred in a single state, 58 (78%) of the outbreaks were in states where the sale of unpasteurized milk was allowed. States that allow the legal sale of raw milk for human consumption have more raw milk–related outbreaks than states that do not allow raw milk to be legally sold for human consumption.

Isn’t Raw Milk Better for You?

Many people believe that foods with little to no processing are better for their health. However, pasteurization kills disease-causing germs, but the majority of nutrients remain in milk after it is pasteurized. There is no medical or nutritional advantage gained from drinking raw milk, in fact, the opposite is true.

Did you know?

Pasteurization of milk is a procedure that uses moderate heat, often less than 212 ° F.

The pasteurization process kills harmful organisms but does not reduce milk’s nutritional value.

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