

Chow Line

News from the College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences

Think long, hard before choosing raw milk

What are the risks and benefits of raw milk?

If you ask proponents of raw milk, the product offers a range of benefits. But if you ask scientists, public health authorities or food safety experts — or those who have suffered severe illnesses from consumption of raw milk and products made from it — the risks far outweigh any potential upside.

Raw milk was in the news recently when routine testing found *Listeria* bacteria in raw milk from a dairy in Pennsylvania, where sales of the product are legal. Fortunately, no illnesses were reported. In Ohio, raw milk cannot be sold for human consumption, but consumers can participate in “herd-share agreements” in which they own part of a herd and can collect raw milk from it.

Listeria are one of many organisms killed with pasteurization, which heats milk to a specific temperature for a set period of time to kill bacteria responsible for diseases, such as *Campylobacter*, *Salmonella* and *E. coli*. Pasteurization is generally recognized by health professionals as one of the most effective food safety interventions ever.

While pasteurization removes 99.999 percent of bacteria, it can't provide a 100 percent guarantee of safety. But the risk from raw milk is much greater. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that the risk of illness from raw milk is at least 150 times greater than the risk from pasteurized milk.

In addition, the health benefits of raw milk are unclear. In a 2014 Johns Hopkins University review of studies, authors found no evidence that the benefits from drinking raw milk outweigh the risks.

Despite the risks, some states have legalized the sale of raw milk in order to give consumers a choice. With rising interest in raw, unprocessed



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foods and increased availability, illnesses linked to raw milk are increasing.

A 2015 study in the journal *Emerging Infectious Diseases* reported that the average annual number of outbreaks caused by raw milk was four times higher from 2007-2012 than it was from 1993-2006. In addition, the number of outbreaks linked to raw milk increased from 30 from 2007-2009 to 51 in 2010-2012. Those 81 outbreaks caused 979 illnesses and 73 hospitalizations.

Although outbreaks are increasing, they are still relatively rare because there are still relatively few raw milk consumers. That's one reason why many feel safe drinking unpasteurized milk: You can drink it for years and never suffer ill effects.

But that's a false sense of security, health officials say. Unpasteurized milk can carry bacteria that cause disease. And the potential for harm goes beyond a few days of tummy troubles: These bacteria can cause life-threatening diseases that can result in kidney failure, stroke or paralysis. The risk is particularly high for young children, the elderly and people with weakened immune systems due to conditions such as cancer, diabetes, HIV/AIDS or an organ transplant.

Before you make a decision for you and your family, please review information from the CDC, including three videos of people telling their stories of serious illnesses linked to raw milk, at go.osu.edu/CDCrawmilk.

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Editor: This column was reviewed by Sanja Ilic, Ohio State University Extension field specialist in Food Safety.

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