
Raw (unpasteurised) milk

Summary

- Raw milk is milk that has not been pasteurised to kill the bacteria that could be harmful to humans.
 - Drinking raw (unpasteurised) milk increases the risk of contracting serious illnesses.
 - The sale of raw cow's milk for human consumption is illegal.
 - Raw milk is sometimes labelled and sold as 'cosmetic milk', 'bath milk' or pet milk.
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Raw milk is milk that has not been pasteurised to kill bacteria that could be harmful to humans. No matter how carefully it has been produced, raw milk may be unsafe. It is important that you understand the risks associated with drinking raw milk and balance this risk against the claimed 'benefits'.

If you drink raw milk, it increases your risk of acquiring various gastrointestinal illnesses, including those caused by microorganisms (bacteria, bugs, or germs) such as *Salmonella spp.*, *pathogenic E. coli*, *Staphylococcus aureus*, *Campylobacter jejuni*, and *Listeria monocytogenes*.

People exposed to these organisms may experience symptoms ranging from mild discomfort (diarrhoea and vomiting) to life-threatening illnesses such as listeriosis or haemolytic uraemic syndrome (HUS), which can result in renal failure in otherwise healthy people.

Raw milk can become contaminated

There are various ways by which raw milk may become contaminated with micro-organisms.

Farms are places where disease-causing bacteria can be found. Some bacteria may end up directly in the milk from a cow or goat, especially if the animal has a disease such as mastitis. Bacteria may also contaminate milk during the milking process, or during transport, processing, packaging, and storage. Poor hygiene practices increase the risks.

Farmers adhering to good hygienic practices during milking may reduce, but will not completely eliminate the risk of contamination. No matter what precautions are taken by the farmer, they cannot guarantee their milk will always be free from harmful bacteria.

Sale of raw milk and raw milk products is illegal in Australia

In Australia, the sale of raw cow's milk for human consumption is illegal. In Victoria, it is also illegal to package, deliver or provide raw milk for consumption.

Cosmetic or bath milk is not for human consumption

Raw milk is sometimes labelled and sold as 'cosmetic milk', 'bath milk' or 'pet milk'. Cosmetic, bath or pet milk is not produced under the strict standards or supervision applied to dairy food production. While the sale of these products is not illegal, they must be clearly labelled to alert customers that they are not for human consumption. Sometimes the label is not prominent.

High-risk groups and raw milk

Everyone is vulnerable to illness caused by organisms that may be present in raw milk. However, the risks are even greater for:

- young children
 - people who are elderly
 - people with underlying health problems
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- people who have a compromised immune system
- pregnant women.

Pasteurisation and its effect on milk

Since the 1940s, it has been compulsory to pasteurise cow's milk in Australia. Pasteurisation involves heating milk for a short period of time. Usually milk is heated to 72 °C for 15 seconds. This process is very effective in destroying any disease-causing bacteria that may be present in raw milk, and makes the final product safe for human consumption.

Pasteurisation is a perfectly simple and straightforward process, and results in a product that is safe and suitable for everyone.

It has been claimed that pasteurisation destroys some of the beneficial components of raw milk. There is no substantiated evidence to suggest there is any significant difference at all in the nutritional status of pasteurised or unpasteurised milk. There is also no credible scientific evidence to show raw milk provides additional health benefits.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Gastroenterologist
- Dietitians Association of Australia Tel. 1800 812 942

Things to remember

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