

Raw Milk: Questions and Answers

What is raw milk?

Raw milk is milk that has not been pasteurized. In Canada, it is illegal for anyone to sell raw milk to consumers. Federal and provincial laws both state that raw milk must be pasteurized before it is sold. Pasteurization heats milk to high temperatures and kills bacteria that can cause disease, making it safe to drink.

Is raw milk safe to drink?

No. Raw milk may contain bacteria that can cause serious diseases, including *Salmonella* and *E. coli*, and an organism called *Listeria monocytogenes*. This organism can cause septicemia, meningitis and may even result in death in babies, elderly people, or persons with weak immune systems. If a pregnant woman becomes infected, it can result in stillbirth, or miscarriage. Pasteurization kills *Listeria monocytogenes* and all other harmful bacteria.

What is pasteurization?

Pasteurization heats milk to high temperatures and kills bacteria that can cause disease, without significantly changing the nutritional content, flavour or quality of the milk. Rapid cooling of the milk helps prevent spoilage and keeps it safe to drink. The process was named after its inventor, French chemist and microbiologist Louis Pasteur. Before pasteurization was adopted in the early 1900s, there were many outbreaks of milk-borne disease and death in Canada. With pasteurization, public health in Canada took a giant step forward.

Is raw milk nutritionally superior to pasteurized milk?

No. Pasteurization destroys disease-causing organisms. It does not affect the quality of nutrients present in milk, such as calcium, protein, riboflavin, niacin, folic acid, vitamin B6, pantothenic acid and vitamin A. About 20 percent of vitamin C is destroyed during pasteurization, but milk is not a significant source of vitamin C in any case. While some people believe that raw milk is nutritionally superior, any supposed health benefit is greatly outweighed by the overwhelming evidence that drinking unpasteurized milk can make you sick. And that there is no evidence that raw milk is nutritionally superior. Parents should consider that children are particularly at risk for infections from drinking raw milk, and make the safe choice to give them only pasteurized milk.

Is it legal to sell raw milk cheese in Ontario?

Yes, in some cases. Certain raw milk cheeses are permitted provided that they meet the legislated requirements (provincial and federal) for manufacturing and aging.

Can the bacteria from drinking unpasteurized milk be passed on to others?

Yes. If someone becomes ill from drinking raw milk, the infection can be passed from person to person by hand-to-mouth contact. Individuals can also become carriers of disease, passing the disease on to another person without showing signs of illness themselves.

What should I do if I find unpasteurized milk products for sale?

Raw milk is a proven health risk, so you should not buy or drink unpasteurized milk. It is also illegal to sell, deliver or distribute unpasteurized milk. You can report unpasteurized milk sales to the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) complaint line at 1-800-466-2372 extension 64391 or contact your local public health unit. For a list of local health units, visit http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/contact/phu/phuloc_mn.html