Like Russian Roulette? Try Raw Milk.

By Ruth Kava — March 13, 2017

If you'd like to play Russian roulette, but don't have a loaded gun handy, you could also try drinking raw milk. True, the chances are less loaded against you, but can still be as devastating, as evidenced by a recent outbreak of *Listeria monocytogenes* food poisoning attributed to a creamery in Walton, New York that specializes in unpasteurized milk products. The CDC "estimates that Listeria infection is the third leading cause of death from food poisoning in the United States. About 1,600 people get sick from Listeria each year, and about 260 die."

This particular bacteria is a nasty customer — unlike many other bugs, it can survive and grow in refrigerator temperatures, so a contaminated cheese or other dairy product becomes more contaminated the longer it's stored. People who come down with Listeriosis might suffer from fever and diarrhea; but if a pregnant woman is infected she might have a miscarriage or preterm labor, or even suffer a stillbirth. And the infection could prove fatal for a newborn, or cause meningitis in a baby infected *in utero*.

Other folks who are at increased risk from listeriosis include older adults and those with weakened immune systems. The CDC says that people 65 and older are 4 times more likely to get such infections, and over half the infections that occur are in such folks. Those whose immune systems aren't normal — say someone on some types of chemotherapy — are less able to deal with invading microbes.
Epidemiological data points to the Vulto Creamery in Walton as the source of the current outbreak, first described on March 9, 2017. Laboratory studies indicate that the strain of the bacteria from left-over cheeses in infected people's homes match that found in cheeses from the creamery. Thus far, two people have died and six have been hospitalized because of this Listeria infection. Cheeses from this source are mostly sold in the Northeast — New York City and environs, Connecticut, and Massachusetts.

It's not known yet how the cheeses became contaminated — did the milk they were made from (they were all made from raw milk) already carry the Listeria, or did the contamination occur in the creamery? Further investigation will be necessary to answer that question. If it was the milk, then more than these cheeses will have to be recalled.

So why do some people swear by raw milk? Their claim that it tastes better than the safer pasteurized version is purely subjective, and the misguided claim that raw milk is somehow healthier or more nutritious is refuted by much scientific evidence. Current methods of pasteurization treat milk with high temperature for very brief periods (say 15 seconds or even less\(^\text{[2]}\)), and any vitamins lost are not enough to make any real difference to a person's health. Considering the possible risks, particularly to vulnerable populations, one should carefully consider whether the supposed benefits are worth any exposure to pathogenic bacteria.

Anyone thinking about switching to raw milk or its products should think about such outbreaks — and while Russian roulette is probably more dangerous, why take the risk?

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