Raw Milk: To Drink or Not to Drink

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For many people, the concept of drinking unpasteurized milk may seem foreign. After all, you cannot legally purchase raw milk in eighteen states, and in four others it can only be purchased as pet food. Even if you could purchase raw milk in your local grocery store, would you want to? Hasn't raw milk been recognized as a microbial hazard since pasteurization began in the 1920s? Apparently not, since there seems to be a growing interest in drinking raw milk, as noted in a recent Boston Globe article.

What is drawing people to raw dairy products? If you have ever had the opportunity to sample fresh milk straight from the cow or unpasteurized cheese from Europe, you will understand that flavor is one explanation. But for some people it goes beyond flavor and has to do with supposed health benefits and buying local products. There have been some studies suggesting raw milk may help counter conditions such as asthma, allergies, colitis, and diabetes. However, no real cause and effect has been firmly established.

Great taste, potential health benefits -- it all sounds good, so why does the government so heavily regulate the sale of raw milk? Let us not forget the whole reason we pasteurize in the first place: Milk is an excellent growth medium, and it carries a high risk of microbial contamination such as E. coli, listeria, salmonella, and other pathogens. And while nobody wants to get foodborne illness, listeria can be especially dangerous for pregnant women, since it can cause miscarriage. Before milk was pasteurized in the 1920s, it caused a host of health problems, mostly in young children. Just last year, the CDC noted that twenty-nine people were reported to be ill with salmonella from raw milk produced and sold by a single dairy in southern Pennsylvania.

If all sanitary precautions are scrupulously followed, and the dairy cows are healthy, raw milk may be fine, but it is strongly advised that anyone with a compromised immune system, a young child, or a pregnant woman not take a chance on that being the case. It is important to note that raw milk could not be produced safely on a large scale because of the possibility of breaks in sanitation.

Consuming raw dairy products is ultimately a personal decision, just like eating steak tartar or raw seafood. Like it or not, any food can pose some safety risk, but certain foods pose much higher risks. The best advice is simple: Buyer beware.

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See also: ACSH's brochure What's the Story? The Role of Milk in the Diet.