

# The hazards and hidden dangers of drinking raw milk

By Ingrid Van der Linden

Drinking the raw milk that they produce is a common practice for most dairy farmers and their families. Unfortunately, raw milk is not always as safe as we would like to think. It can contain certain microbes that can cause very serious illness and even death, especially in the very young or the elderly. Particularly at risk are young babies who, when weaned from breast milk, are often given the raw milk.

A few of the most common microbes found in raw milk include *Campylobacter*, *Salmonella*, *Yersinia*, Q fever, and a strain of *E. coli* that causes a severe hemorrhagic disease. Some of these infectious agents are found in normal, healthy cows. This means we are unaware that the cows are carrying them, and unaware of the potential danger that exists.

Contamination of milk occurs by many means. It can be introduced at the time of milking directly from a contaminated or infected udder. It can also be introduced at the time of milking from contaminated surfaces of the udder, teats and hair. Equipment used for milking, filtering, cooling, storing or distributing milk are other sources of microbes. Milk residues left on the equipment provide nutrient for the microbes, therefore if the equipment is not properly cleaned and sanitized, the situation will be aggravated. As well, some microbes are wound directly into the milk from the cow.

Milk itself is an excellent medium for encouraging the multiplication of bacteria. This means that even a slight contamination can cause a major problem, as milk gives the microbes the opportunity to multiply and increase in numbers. In addition, the fat content of milk helps protect the microbes from stomach acids that normally destroy them. This increases their chances of causing illness.

Continuous consumption of raw milk can result in a certain degree of natural immunity or resistance to some of the infectious agents found in raw milk. However, this resistance develops to only a few of the many disease causing microbes. Because continuous exposure is necessary to develop protective immunity, children, especially babies, have not had the opportunity to develop any natural resistance and are thus just as susceptible as non-dairy farm consumers.

Another area to look at concerns the popular belief that raw milk is more nutritious than pasteurized milk. It has been shown in many studies that the changes which occur are insignificant. (1)

Because of the current health trend in which raw milk has become popular because of the false belief that it is more nutritious, dairy farmers will be faced with the question of whether to comply with a request for raw milk. It has been illegal to sell raw milk to the public for some time now and recently it has also become illegal to give it away. Dairy farmers should give serious thought to the consequences of

such action should illness follow consumption of raw milk from their farm. Visitors to the farm should also be cautioned about the potential hazards of drinking raw milk while at the farm.

Prevention of the potential serious illness resulting from drinking raw milk is by home pasteurization. This can be done by a stove-top method, or by using a commercial home pasteurization unit available through many milking equipment dealers. Home pasteurization in the microwave is NOT recommended. More information is available from Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food offices.

What other industry consumes their product raw? Certainly not the beef, pork or poultry industries! Although such a comparison is not exactly fair, it is something to keep in mind especially when giving raw milk to children.

(1) Potter, M.E., et al. Unpasteurized milk. The Hazards of a Health Fetish. *JAMA*, 1964; 232(13):2048-2052.

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