

Risks Associated with Unpasteurized Milk

This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a health care professional about any health concerns you have, and before you make any changes to your diet, lifestyle or treatment.

Some people believe that drinking unpasteurized milk is healthy and good for you. Is this true?

No. Drinking unpasteurized milk (also called raw milk) can result in mild illnesses, long-lasting serious diseases, or even death. Disease-causing bacteria found in unpasteurized milk includes E. coli O157, salmonella, and campylobacter. E. coli O157 is the same bacteria that caused the outbreak in Walkerton, Ontario.

What are the symptoms of infection?

These bacteria can cause severe diarrhea (which may be bloody), stomach cramps or abdominal pain, vomiting, fever, weakness and chills.

Are some people more at risk than others?

Yes. Certain groups such as young children, the elderly, people who are ill, pregnant women and those with weak immune systems are at increased risk of serious illness.

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

Yes. If someone becomes sick from drinking raw milk, this infection can be passed from person-to-person by hand-to-mouth contact. This fecal-oral spread from person-to-person happens especially when someone has diarrhea and is not washing their hands properly or maintaining good hygiene. Disease can also be spread to those who are caring for a person who is ill with diarrhea.

How does pasteurization make milk safe to drink?

Pasteurization is a heating process. The minimal pasteurization requirement in Ontario is to heat the milk to 72 degrees Celsius for 16 seconds at a dairy processing plant. This process destroys disease-producing bacteria. Milk sold in grocery stores is pasteurized.

What should I do if I drink raw milk and develop symptoms?

Anyone who shows symptoms should see their doctor immediately. About 10 per cent of people with E. coli O157 develop Hemolytic Uremic Syndrome (HUS). HUS is a serious complication that can lead to kidney failure and death.

What should I do if I find unpasteurized milk?

It is illegal to sell, offer to sell, deliver or distribute unpasteurized milk. Unpasteurized milk should be reported to the Ministry of Agriculture and Food's complaint line at 1-888-466-2372 ext. 64391.