



got raw milk?

Nature's perfect food?
Or public enemy number one?
Here's why a growing number
of families are turning to raw
milk, despite the hype.

by Marygrace Taylor

"I notice most [kids] get chronic ear infections, and many also deal with asthma and allergies. But my kids don't have any of that, and I think it's at least in part due to the fact that they drink raw milk."

Liz Reitzig's oldest daughter, Alyssa, began having digestive issues before she turned 1, when she started eating solids and drinking pasteurized cow's milk. Desperate to find a solution, Reitzig took her daughter to several doctors, but none were able to offer a diagnosis or treatment advice. So at the suggestion of some friends and family members, she and her husband decided to try raw milk, which they heard wasn't associated with the same digestive problems as its pasteurized counterpart. "We were skeptical at first, but soon our daughter's digestive problems went away," says the mom from Bowie, Maryland. Now, the Reitzigs and their five kids, ages 10, 8, 6, 4, and 1, all drink raw milk.

Despite the dramatic warnings from healthcare organizations, they have no intention of stopping. With 3 percent of the U.S. population identifying themselves as raw milk drinkers, the Reitzigs are part of the small but passionate—and growing—number of families and individuals turning to raw milk in an effort to improve their health with traditional, unprocessed foods. But should your family do the same?

RAW, PASTEURIZED—WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

You probably don't think of milk as a processed food, but in almost all instances, it is. Before being sold, the vast majority of milk in the United States is pasteurized, or heated to high temperatures for a short period to kill illness-causing bacteria like salmonella, e.coli, listeria, and campylobacter. Pasteurization, which was developed in the late 1800s, became widely used in response to rising cases of tuberculosis, scarlet fever, typhoid fever, and other infections caused by consuming raw milk produced in unsanitary environments. In 1908, Chicago was the first city to pass a mandatory pasteurization law in an effort to improve public health, and in 1924, the U.S. Public Health Service started helping states develop voluntary pasteurization programs. Michigan became the first state to require pasteurization in 1947. In 1987 the FDA began requiring that all milk sold for interstate commerce be pasteurized. Today, milk-borne illnesses account for less than 1 percent of reported food-borne illness outbreaks, compared to its peak of 25 percent nearly 100 years ago. "Pasteurization is consid-

ered one of the biggest health advances of the 20th century because it dramatically reduced the number of people getting sick and dying from diseases spread through milk," says Isabel Maples, a registered dietitian and spokesperson for the Mid-Atlantic Dairy Association.

Raw milk is the stuff that is bottled and sold for consumption without being pasteurized. (A gallon of organic raw milk can run anywhere from \$9 to \$12, compared to a gallon of organic pasturized milk, which costs about \$5.) By not subjecting the milk to high heat, advocates say, it retains health-promoting properties that would otherwise be destroyed: Raw milk is rich in beneficial bacteria that can help boost the immune system and enhance absorption of calcium and vitamins. It also contains digestive enzymes not found in pasteurized milk, which is thought to be the reason why people with lactose intolerance are often able to drink raw milk without a problem. Raw milk may also contain higher levels of omega-3 fatty acids.

WHY DO PEOPLE PREFER RAW?

Pasteurized or raw, milk is a nutritious food: It's high in protein and calcium, and contains additional nutrients like potassium (as well as vitamin D, in pasteurized, fortified varieties). But not everyone can drink it—between 30 and 50 million Americans are lactose-intolerant, and milk is the second most common allergen among children. For some, it may worsen ADHD symptoms or cause mucus, congestion, or acne. Consumers of raw milk, even many who can't tolerate the pasteurized stuff, like Reitzig's daughter, say they don't experience many of these problems—and feel even better when they drink raw milk. "As a mom of five, I spend a lot of time around young kids. I notice most of them get chronic ear infections, and many also deal with asthma and allergies. But my kids don't have any of that, and I think it's at least in part due to the fact that they drink raw milk," says Reitzig.

European research confirms Reitzig's hunch. Several recent studies have shown that children who consume raw milk instead of pasteurized are less likely to have allergies, asthma, and hay fever. The effect may come from raw milk's high levels of beneficial enzymes and bacteria that help strengthen our immune systems, resulting in fewer illnesses, increased vitality, and

decreased incidence of allergies, says Mark Gebhart, M.D., a public health professor at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. Gebhart was wary when he first began researching raw milk in the late 1990s, but became convinced of its benefits after attending a meeting for a local chapter of the Weston A. Price Foundation, a nutrition education nonprofit that advocates the benefits of raw milk. His three children went "from breast milk to raw milk," and, like Reitzig's children, rarely get the ear infections common in many young kids. But the benefits of raw milk might go far beyond decreased incidence of childhood illnesses: "Drinking raw milk keeps the human gut well-populated with beneficial microbial organisms," says Gebhart. "That can help with Crohn's disease, irritable bowel syndrome, and even celiac disease, since high levels of good bacteria can help rebuild healthy intestinal tissue."

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF RAW MILK?

Some raw dairy farmers follow very strict protocol to ensure the milk their cows produce is safe, like cleaning pens to avoid mud or waste buildup, controlling rodents and birds, and having milkers wash their hands immediately before milking. But a clean milking process is different than a sterile one (which is impossible to achieve, and why pasteurization was adopted in the first place). There's always the possibility that milk could become contaminated by manure, infected cow udders, or matter from the surrounding environment, all of which could harbor harmful bacteria like e. coli, salmonella, or campylobacter. Usually, the bacteria result in stomach cramps, diarrhea, and fever that lasts about a week. But young children, the elderly, and others with weakened immune systems could be at risk for more serious complications, such as hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS), a potentially life-threatening kidney infection caused by e. coli. "Pasteurizing milk nearly eradicates these risks, but with raw milk, there's no safety net," says Maples.

Plenty of people drink raw milk and don't get sick from it. Problem is, the only way you'll know if your batch of milk is contaminated is if you get sick after drinking it, since you can't spot the bad bacteria by looking at, smelling, or tasting the milk. The germs

can be detected through lab tests, and in addition to regular, mandatory testing by state agencies, many raw dairy farmers also have their milk tested independently even more often than what their states require. California-based Organic Pastures, the largest raw dairy in the country (their 400 dairy cows produce 2,200 gallons of raw milk each day), voluntarily tests samples of their milk 12 times a day, says founder Mark McAfee.

But foods we eat all the time—like raw spinach, peanut butter, and even pasteurized milk—can and do get contaminated, too, and they're not considered controversial. Is raw milk really that different? The government says yes. According to the Centers for Disease Control, raw milk is too risky to drink, and its beneficial claims are unfounded. The agency recently bolstered its position with a newly released review of U.S. dairy product outbreaks that occurred between 1993 and 2006. Of the 121 outbreaks where the pasteurization status was known, 60 percent was determined to have been caused by raw milk. But that means the remaining 40 percent of illnesses were caused by pasteurized milk. What's more, approximately 48 million Americans get sick from food-related illnesses each year, and even the FDA says people are roughly 10 times more likely to get sick from deli meats or non-reheated hot dogs than from raw milk. "Every time there is a possible connection between illness and raw milk, government officials issue dire press releases and call for bans on raw milk sales," says the Weston A. Price Foundation president Sally Fallon Morell. "However, these numbers fail to justify the government opposition and prove what we've known all along, that raw milk is a safe and healthy food," she says.

IS RAW MILK RIGHT FOR YOUR FAMILY?

Should families drink raw milk or not? The American Academy of Pediatrics says no, since harmful bacteria are more likely to cause serious illness in young children and pregnant women than in older kids or adults. But not all pediatricians say raw milk is taboo. Doctors at Pediatric Alternatives, an integrative medicine practice in Mill Valley, California, have been recommending raw milk to families for 10 years, including homemade

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formula made with raw milk for babies who can't be breastfed. "Many of our kids are thriving on raw milk," says Lindy Woodard, M.D. of Pediatric Alternatives. "Some of them had allergies that got better after drinking it, and some were considered lactose intolerant on pasteurized milk."

This past spring, 10 Californians developed infections from the bacteria campylobacter that were traced back to raw cream (raw milk and raw milk products were also recalled, though no one was hospitalized and there were no deaths). While Woodard is troubled by the outbreak, she still recommends raw milk because she believes it's a nutritious food, but also reminds parents that consuming raw milk can come with a risk and to watch for any signs of fever or diarrhea after they or their kids consume it. "Some of our families are committed to whole, unadulterated foods—they know their farmers and feel consuming raw milk is worth the risk. Others can't imagine why they would take any risk at all," Woodard says. With both sides of the raw milk debate in gridlock, the decision is left up to individual families: "Drinking raw milk is a personal choice," says Reitzig. "If you look into it and decide that it's for you or that it isn't, that's fine. Parents are smart enough to make that choice."

where can you get raw milk?

Drinking raw milk is legal in all 50 states, but that doesn't always mean it's easy to buy. Consumers can buy raw milk from stores in states like California and Pennsylvania, but in states like Texas and New York, the milk has to be purchased on the farm where it's produced. Since interstate sales of raw milk are illegal, residents of states that don't allow the sale of raw milk—like Wisconsin or New Jersey—often turn to herd shares. In a herd share, consumers buy a share of a dairy cow from a farmer (the money goes toward housing the cow, caring for it, and milking it) and in exchange receive some of the cow's milk (learn about your state's law at farmtoconsumer.org/raw_milk_map.htm). Since herd share members are technically part-owners of the cows themselves, they also own the cow's milk, and therefore don't have to buy it.