

Raw Milk: What You Need to Know Before You Consume

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Yogurt, cheese, and milk are everyday staples for many Americans. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans – a set of science-based recommendations for healthy eating – encourages including dairy products in a balanced diet. In most states, dairy products must be pasteurized, a process that heats milk to kill harmful bacteria before it reaches consumers. However, recent changes in Arkansas law have impacted the sale of raw (unpasteurized) milk.

Raw Milk: Past, Present, and Local Perspectives

The Industrial Revolution had a profound impact on the lives of many Americans, prompting a substantial migration from rural areas to cities in search of employment, economic stability, and an enhanced quality of life. As people in the United States shifted from rural to city living, their milk supply became less safe due to unsanitary conditions and inadequate refrigeration. Milk was transported further, resulting in higher storage temperatures for longer times. Noticing these



effects, public health reformers and activists advocated for the safety of the milk supply, which eventually became a matter of public concern, being discussed in multiple forms of media and, inevitably, in the legal system. Milk pasteurization has been a concern for both legal and public health reasons for over a century.

As early as 1914, cities began making laws requiring milk to be pasteurized. In the 1920s, the federal government introduced the Standard Milk Ordinance, which provided towns and states with voluntary guidelines on

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milk safety and quality. It wasn't until 1987 that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) mandated milk pasteurization for products sold across state lines through the Grade "A" Pasteurized Milk Ordinance (PMO). Since the passage of PMO, various groups have opposed the pasteurization requirement, citing the potential health benefits of raw milk (that are not supported by scientific evidence), support for local dairy farms, and individual rights.

It remains illegal under federal law to sell raw milk packaged for consumer use across state lines (interstate commerce). Still, each state has its own regulations regarding the sale of raw milk within state borders (intrastate), with some states permitting its sale.

In Arkansas, state law for some time only allowed limited sales of unpasteurized goat milk. Then, in 2013, Arkansas legislators passed Act 1209 to allow limited on-farm sales of raw cow milk for human consumption. In 2025, Arkansas legislators expanded the law even more through Act 698, which allows the sale of raw goat and cow milk at natural food stores in addition to farmers' markets and directly from the dairy farmer. The new law does not define "natural food store."

Note: The resale of raw milk is not permitted. Raw milk purchased under this act may not be used in food products that are going to be sold.

Act 698 took effect in April 2025.

What does Act 698 State?

This Act amends Arkansas § 20-59-248 and:

- Defines locally produced whole milk products as whole milk produced on an Arkansas farm.
- Defines raw milk as goat milk, sheep milk, and whole milk that has not been pasteurized.
- Defines raw milk products as raw milk, raw cream as an ingredient in butter, buttermilk, cheese, cottage cheese, kefir, yogurt, colostrum, and other products that use raw milk as an ingredient.
- Defines whole milk as containing at least 3.25% butterfat and 8.25% solids.

- Allows the sale of raw milk and raw milk products at the farm where the milk is produced, at a farmer's market, at a natural food store, or via delivery from the farm where the milk is produced.
- Allows the advertising of raw milk, raw milk products, and whole milk that has not been pasteurized, provided by the seller.
 - Posts a sign that is at least 18 inches by 24 inches, indicating in large, clear text the name and address of the farm with the seller's contact information.
 - A statement indicating that the product is sold for personal use and not for resale is fresh whole milk that has NOT been pasteurized, that the State of Arkansas has not inspected the farm and the milk sold by the farm, and that the consumer assumes all liability for health issues that may result from consuming the product.
 - A label with the name and address of the farm, along with that statement, must be affixed to the bottle or package.
- Farmers who sell fresh, whole, unpasteurized milk are required to allow consumers to inspect their cows and barns upon request.
- In addition to the required labels and posted signs, when selling raw milk products at a location other than the farm, the seller must also post an additional warning indicating that the product has not been pasteurized and may contain harmful bacteria that can cause serious illness. The raw milk product must continually be refrigerated or kept on ice and maintained at 40 degrees Fahrenheit or below before sale to the consumer. The consumer must sign an acknowledgment of risk, acknowledging that they assume all liability for health issues that may result from consuming the raw milk product.

The Arkansas Department of Health does not test raw milk for certain diseases, as is done with milk from Class "A" dairies in Arkansas. The animal's health is not inspected or tested by the Arkansas Livestock and Poultry Commission.

Raw Dairy: Why Some People Choose It

Motivation To Consume Raw Dairy Products	Why Some Choose Raw Milk	What to Keep in Mind
Nutrition	Individuals may believe raw milk is more nutritious, thinking that pasteurization and homogenization remove beneficial nutrients like probiotics, protein, vitamins, and minerals.	Research currently indicates that there are no significant differences in the nutrient content between pasteurized and unpasteurized milk. Milk and milk products all contain carbohydrates, protein, vitamin D, calcium, phosphorus, vitamin B12, potassium, riboflavin, vitamin A, selenium, zinc, and iodine. The fat content of milk and milk products varies by the product selected.
Taste	Some people find raw milk creamier and more flavorful than pasteurized milk, while others don't notice a difference.	Taste is personal and influenced by genetics, culture, health, and psychological elements, leading to varying preferences for raw or pasteurized milk. The fat content of raw milk is typically higher, contributing to the creamier texture some prefer.
Health	Individuals may believe that raw milk offers health benefits such as improved digestion, stronger immunity, or better nutrient absorption. Scientific evidence does not support these claims.	Public health authorities, including the CDC and FDA, warn that raw milk can contain harmful bacteria such as E. coli, Salmonella, and Listeria, which can cause serious illnesses, particularly in vulnerable populations.
The "Natural" Appeal	Some consumers are attracted to raw milk because they see it as a more natural, less processed choice that aligns with the values of whole foods and traditional farming practices.	Perceptions of what is "natural" can vary, and being natural does not necessarily mean something is safer or healthier.
Support of Local Dairy Farms	Many people choose raw milk to support local dairy farms, strengthen community ties, and build trust between consumers and producers.	While supporting local farms is essential to many consumers, the safety standards for raw milk can vary significantly between producers. An outbreak connected to a local farm would incur devastating consequences. Other ways to support local dairy farmers include purchasing additional products they offer.

What are the Risks with Consuming Raw Dairy?

Consuming raw dairy products, including raw milk, can pose significant health risks. Unlike pasteurized milk, raw milk hasn't been heated to kill harmful bacteria. These bacteria, such as pathogenic E. coli, Salmonella enterica (including typhoidal and non-typhoidal strains), Listeria monocytogenes, and Campylobacter spp., can cause severe illness in humans. Symptoms can include stomach pain, vomiting, diarrhea, and fever. Secondary complications, such as kidney failure, spontaneous miscarriage, meningitis, Guillain-Barré syndrome, and other chronic diseases, can also occur. For certain people, such as young children, older adults, those who are pregnant, and those with weakened immune systems, the risk is even higher, as these groups are more vulnerable to severe illness.

Even if raw milk is from a clean farm, it can still contain dangerous germs. Bacteria can be

found in milk from the cow, which passes internally through the animal even before milking, in the milking equipment, or during storage and transportation. While some believe that raw milk is healthier or safer because it's natural, expert organizations like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the FDA, and food safety researchers and experts recommend pasteurized milk.

What If I Decide To Purchase Raw Milk?



If you decide to purchase raw milk, you should be aware of the potential health risks and take steps to minimize them. Ensure the farm or producer follows strict safety protocols, including clean milking practices and proper refrigeration. This requires you to visit the farm regularly to verify that they are using the best practices. Additionally, if you choose to purchase raw milk, consider pasteurizing it at home using your

microwave or stovetop. However, be aware that home-pasteurization techniques are not as efficient or effective as commercial methods, which may result in quality degradation.

When purchasing raw milk, always buy from a trusted, reputable source that provides clear information about the milk's handling and storage. It's also important to keep the milk refrigerated at all times to reduce the risk of bacterial growth. If you decide to consume raw dairy, consider talking to your healthcare provider, especially if you or anyone in your household is part of a vulnerable group. Your healthcare provider can help you weigh the potential benefits and risks to make an informed decision based on your specific health needs.

Outlook

Agriculture is Arkansas's number one industry. Farming is vitally essential to the state's economy. Our farmers are our friends and neighbors.

Method	Steps
Microwave 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Place milk in a microwave-safe glass container. 2. Heat to 161°F for 15 seconds using a thermometer or temperature probe. 3. Stir the milk once or twice during the heating period to equalize the temperature throughout. 4. Set the pan of hot milk in a container of cold water. Keep the water cold by adding ice. 5. Continue to stir until the milk is cold, and then store in the refrigerator.
Stovetop 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Put water in the bottom pan and bring it to a boil. 2. Pour the raw milk into the top pan. Heat it over the boiling water, stirring constantly. 3. Use a cooking thermometer to determine when the temperature reaches 161°F, and keep it at this temperature for 15 seconds. 4. Set the pan of hot milk in a container of cold water. Keep the water cold by adding ice. 5. Continue to stir until the milk is cold, and then refrigerate.

Source: OSU Master Food Preserver Program

Raw milk is a debated topic, with some believing it's more nutritious and natural than pasteurized milk. However, health experts warn that raw milk can contain harmful bacteria that pose serious risks, particularly to vulnerable populations. When consumers choose raw milk, they should be aware of the risks and that some of the risks can be minimized by purchasing from reputable sources, storing the products properly in the refrigerator, and pasteurizing them at home. Supporting Arkansas dairy farmers and protecting your family from bacterial contamination are both crucial.

Please take the time to get to know your local dairy farmer and discuss ways to support them. Visit your local farmers' markets and develop a relationship with the vendors. Building a personal relationship with your local dairy farmer is a great way to learn about their work, challenges, and how we as consumers can support and partner with them.

Ultimately, the decision to consume raw milk should be made carefully, weighing the potentially serious risks and making an informed decision that is right for you and your family.

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