



## Raw Milk and Pregnancy

### Question: Is it safe to drink raw milk in pregnancy?

The short answer: depends who you ask.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration, Centers for Disease Control, American Public Health Association, and American Academy of Pediatrics, as well as the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, oppose drinking raw milk and serve to enforce laws that restrict its sale and accessibility. They will tell you that raw milk is unsafe under any circumstances, especially for pregnant women and children. But ask a mother who grew up drinking raw milk, as did her mother and grandmother before her (which is the case for many Wisconsin farm families) or a mother with a colicky baby or an autistic child who is certain her child's suffering dramatically lessened after daily drinking of raw milk, and you will hear powerful stories about its profound health benefits.

The long answer, which gets at the impassioned, world-wide arguments around the health and safety of raw milk, depends on you – how you define “safe,” how you interpret history and statistics, what you drank prior to pregnancy, who would supply your raw milk, and how you would obtain it. In my lengthy research for this article as well as during a lifetime of knowing farmers and having lived and worked on farms in 3 countries, I respect arguments on both sides of the debate. I believe that after weighing the many factors in this complicated issue, you can best determine whether raw milk is safer than pasteurized milk for you and your baby.

By subjecting milk to pasteurization – a 15-second burst of heat to at least 160 degrees followed by rapid cooling – most of the pathogens that can cause disease in humans are killed. These include the biggest modern culprits: E. coli, salmonella, listeria, and campylobacter. Public health officials assert that pasteurization has helped lower infectious disease rates in the U.S. by more than 90% over the last 100 years. Between 1990 and 2004, 168 disease outbreaks, most frequently salmonellosis and campylobacteriosis, were linked to dairy products. Nearly one-third of these were linked to unpasteurized products, according to the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

The main symptoms of the most common infections are cramps, vomiting, diarrhea and fever, which can lead to serious dehydration in pregnancy and infants. Listeria is a bacteria that can lead to blood infection, meningitis, spontaneous abortion and stillbirth. According to the CDC, there is a relatively rare organism of Salmonella, S. dublin, which is host-adapted to cattle and is more likely to be identified in humans as being derived from raw milk, than are the more common types of Salmonellae. S. dublin infections are more severe and not limited to the digestive tract.

The above statistics make one wonder how raw milk-drinking peoples – since Sami herders milked reindeer in Scandinavia and pastoralists domesticated goats and sheep, 10-12,000 years ago – have come to populate the planet so abundantly! Raw milk defenders open a political and ethical Pandora's box by asking “why?” and “how?” and “what if?”

How did a mammal mother's milk come to be anything other than a healthful, perfect food? True, nature intended it to be drunk directly by an eager little calf, kid, or lamb, and most, if not all, milk contamination occurs on the external side of the udder. It is important to point out, that traditional peoples maximized nature's perfect food (thus avoid exposing very young children to other species' milk) by practicing extended breastfeeding for 2-4 years, and longer in times/places where nutrients were scarce.

Nevertheless, how is it that humans have been drinking the raw milk of other species for a very long time and thrived? I first encountered the controversy in a medical anthropology class, through the work of Weston Price. Dr. Price was a Canadian dentist who studied nutrition in non-industrialized societies in the 1930s and 1940s. He reported that pregnant and lactating women and growing children from these isolated societies all had one or more of the following food groups in common: seafood; organ meats or blood from wild or grazed animals; insects; fats of certain birds and animals; egg yolks; and whole milk, cheese, and butter from grazed animals, eaten raw. I remember watching a film clip of a weaned Eskimo child eating (and relishing like candy!) the raw eyeball of a caribou her father had given her. Most of us non-vegans would probably prefer the intact proteins, enzymes, minerals, vitamins, and fats of milk....

What are the effects of pasteurizing and homogenizing on the rich proteins, enzymes, minerals, vitamins, fats and essential fatty acids found in raw whole milk from grass-fed animals? Raw milk "confessions" teem with testimonials of severe intolerance of commercial cow's milk but no such symptoms with raw milk, as well as of chronic digestive problems, such as irritable bowel syndrome and Crohn's disease, that clear up while drinking raw milk. Other raw milk enthusiasts attest to the superior flavor, the "sweet sweet taste, with an echo of butter," as a raw milk-fed and -raised microbiologist friend described it to me. Raw milk drinkers also base their choice on animal welfare. A previous client explained, "This cow gets to eat all the green grass she wants, and all the sea salt and sea kelp she wants. Her barn smells sweet (even to a city girl like me) and has no flies in it. The cow gets a fan on her in midday, and a full head to tail brushing before her milking sessions (2x a day) to help release oxytocin among other things (conventional farmers inject their cows to stimulate release of milk). In addition, conventional cows are expected to live 3 or 4 years, but pastured cows can live 12 to 15 years. They produce a lot less milk, but they are healthy because they are eating what cows are meant to eat (grass!)."

If raw milk is nature's perfect food – a truth most of our society agrees upon regarding human milk – then the difficulty must lie not in the word "raw," as much as in the word "nature." What exactly is "natural?" How do farmers preserve it, as they midwife and nurture their animals? And as they transport that precious liquid, from animal all the way to our grateful kitchen tables?

When is raw milk safe, when is it unsafe, and how we can know the difference before we drink it? Because America is in a kind of prohibition era as regards raw milk, we are at best inconsistent in procuring and financing research and public protections, such as exist in most countries for obtaining raw milk. We don't know how many people drink raw milk in the U.S., because sale is legal only in a handful of states. We do know that people will go to great lengths and expense to get it. Sale is illegal in Wisconsin, but herd-sharing contracts, not unlike Community Shared Agriculture (CSA) arrangements, exist throughout the state and allow you to obtain milk directly from "your herd."

Sweden, Holland, and Denmark have proven the link between sick, poorly fed, crowded, exclusively indoor and feed-lot animals and food borne diseases. Stringent farm animal welfare laws in those countries (led in Sweden by author Astrid Lindgren, the famed children's champion) have led to vast improvements in food safety. Salmonella has almost been eliminated from Swedish and Dutch eggs

(without dependence on antibiotics). In the U.S., one-half million people become ill every year after eating salmonella-infected eggs; 300 people die. Poultry meat is a major source of the 2 million annual U.S. cases of Campylobacter infection. So what does chicken health have to do with the health of your milk? Chicken manure is routinely fed to cattle in the U.S., along with other industrial by-products, antibiotics, and growth hormones. The pathway of infection is most likely common fecal contamination of the udders, especially in sick cows with diarrhea.

A growing body of immunological research shows that regular exposure to low-level bacteria, even pathogenic ones, strengthens an individual's internal balance of local bacteria and builds immunity to otherwise harmful bacterial loads or strains. In his book, *The Untold Story of Milk*, Ron Schmid discusses findings that regular raw milk drinkers are "much less likely to become ill during outbreaks of illness attributed to raw milk than first-time raw milk drinkers." First encounters with even friendly bacteria often cause intestinal cramping and diarrhea.

With so many factors to weigh in deciding whether raw milk is safe in pregnancy and much time required to research local sources, many women who consult me on this issue choose to wait until after pregnancy to introduce raw milk into their family's diet. At Willy Street Coop, you enjoy access to some of the tastiest and highest quality pasteurized whole-fat milks, yogurts, cultured butter, sour cream and cheeses available. For further information, see [www.realmilk.com](http://www.realmilk.com).

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