Why Pasteurize? The Dangers of Consuming Raw Milk

Background and Overview

Milk, like many foods, contains bacteria. Bacteria can be classified into three general types:
1. Beneficial or Benign
2. Spoilage
3. Harmful or Pathogenic

Most of the bacteria in fresh milk from healthy animals are harmless. However, rapid changes in the health of a milk animal or of a farmer, or contaminants from the environment, can make raw milk potentially dangerous if harmful bacteria are introduced into the milk.

Health Hazards of Raw Milk

Before milk pasteurization was mandated, contaminated milk was linked to serious diseases including typhoid fever, scarlet fever, dysentery, tuberculosis, etc. In addition to the hazards historically associated with raw milk, some new strains of harmful bacteria, called “emerging pathogens”, can get into milk and make people sick – or even die.

Pasteurization Protects Dairy Product Consumers

It is strongly recommended that raw milk never be given to babies, pregnant women, or any person on the farm who is suffering from a chronic disease or a suppressed immune system. Also, it is strongly recommended that raw milk not be given to farm visitors; raw milk consumption could expose these people to extremely costly and painful risks for which a milk producer could be held legally responsible.

Pasteurization is a heat treatment of milk which kills bacteria. In addition, pasteurization and careful packaging in clean, sanitized containers help retard spoilage of milk so it lasts longer after it is purchased. Pasteurization does not completely sanitize milk and milk that is not properly handled can become re-contaminated after the heat treatment.

Want more information on pasteurization and the MQIP? Contact Nicole Martin (nicole.martin@cornell.edu) in the Milk Quality Improvement Program or visit our website https://foodsafety.foodscience.cornell.edu/mqip/

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