



Cheese from raw milk

by the Dairy Standard Agency

Raw milk cheese is made from milk that has not been pasteurised and is generally considered to carry health risks not associated with pasteurised cheeses.

In this context, raw milk is believed to be dangerous, because it carries a higher risk of bacterial infection than pasteurised milk cheeses, especially if handled improperly.

Pasteurised milk

When milk is pasteurised, it is heated to a high temperature and held there for a certain time to kill harmful bacteria such as *Listeria*, *E. coli*, campylobacter, salmonella and others.

Pasteurised milk is not technically sterile; it simply carries less potential bacterial risk than raw milk does. It is still possible for pasteurised milk to become contaminated, however, and like any food product should be handled carefully (hygienically) and kept under proper refrigeration.

Raw milk cheese is more likely to harbour harmful bacteria, because the bacteria are never killed via a pasteurisation process. Therefore, if the milk becomes

contaminated with any bacteria during the milking or cheese-making process, those bacteria may be present in the final product. Consumers would then be exposed to bacteria, which could cause anything from mild stomach distress to death.

The raw tradition

There is, however, a long culinary tradition of raw milk cheeses and some consumers (and connoisseurs) may even claim that raw milk cheese is superior to pasteurised cheese. As cheese ages, it becomes more acidic, meaning that raw milk cheese, which is older, is much safer to eat.

Ultimately, the raw milk versus pasteurised milk cheese debate is about infection and contamination control. Major outbreaks of foodborne illnesses can be carried by pasteurised milk, which has been contaminated during the manufacturing process just as easily as raw milk can be contaminated.

Controlling the threat

In general, milk and cheese products should be handled with care and discarded if they look, smell or taste off.

Pasteurisation is only one part of infection control. A dairy, which is kept clean and hygienic, should produce healthy milk. If cows roam in a clean, safe environment and given appropriate veterinary care, they will also be less likely to carry potential harmful bacteria that pass on to consumers.

Become cheese-wise

When purchasing raw milk cheese, it is a good idea, if possible, to go to the source so you can inspect the conditions for cleanliness personally before buying the product.

The food safety aspects of milk destined for cheese processing as well as cheese in South Africa, is governed by the *Foodstuffs,*

Cosmetics and Disinfectants Act, 1972 (Act 54 of 1972), Regulation 1555 of 21 November 1997, Regulations relating to milk and dairy products.

For more information regarding the food safety aspects of cheese offered for sale in your area, contact your local environmental health practitioner at your municipal offices or the Dairy Standard Agency.

The DSA vision

The Dairy Standard Agency is an independent, expert and objective body partially funded by Milk SA. The vision of the Dairy Standard Agency is to promote the maintenance and improvement of the quality and safety of dairy products in the interest of the consumer.

DSA contact details: 012 665 4250 / 012 665 4260/3 **M&J**

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