



“I’ve been hearing a lot about raw milk. Is it really healthier than pasteurized?”

By Allison Salerno

As part of a pandemic-fueled surge in interest in local foods, demand for raw milk is on the rise. Because farmers usually sell their milk to larger companies for pasteurization and packaging, keeping their dairy on the farm can give them more control over profits. And for consumers, the allure is not just knowing where their milk comes from, but the claims that raw milk is more nutritious than pasteurized—and can boost the immune system and even prevent allergies and asthma in children. Some also say that because raw milk isn’t pasteurized (which exposes milk to mild temps to remove pathogens) it also contains enzymes that make it easier for those with lactose intolerance to digest.

This all flies in the face of public health guidelines, including those from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the American Academy of Pediatrics, which dispute these benefits and are quick to point out that there are data-backed downsides to raw milk. The CDC reports that incidents of food poisoning from bacteria like *E.*

coli and *Salmonella* in raw milk have been climbing and can be severe, especially for children, the elderly and those with compromised immune systems. And while proponents say it’s rare for straight-from-the-source milk to make you sick, get this: even though raw milk accounts for only an estimated 1% of the milk Americans drink, the CDC says it still leads to more outbreaks than all the pasteurized milk that’s consumed.

As for the health claims, a handful of recent research appears to lend credence to some of them. A large 2019 study found that drinking raw milk was linked to a lower risk of asthma, allergies and infections in children from rural areas. In another study of 983 rural European infants published in the *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology*, those who drank raw milk had fewer common respiratory infections. However, all this research only shows an *association*—not cause and effect—so it’s not known if it was the raw milk that conferred the benefits or something else, says Christopher Gardner, Ph.D., director of nutrition studies at the Stanford Prevention Research Center.

Research has also found pasteurization to have a relatively insignificant impact on vitamin and mineral content. And so far, claims that raw milk won’t trigger side effects for those with lactose intolerance appear to be based on anecdotal accounts, adds Gardner, who oversaw a small, randomized trial that found no difference in lactose intolerance or symptom severity between the two milks.

States have the power to decide if and how raw milk is sold, and it’s now possible to obtain it legally in most of them. Laws usually only allow raw milk to be purchased at the farm or a farmers’ market, but in 12 states—including California and South Carolina—you can find it on retail shelves.

THE BOTTOM LINE: We know much more about the risks of drinking raw milk than the benefits, which is why many experts and public health agencies advise against it. If you do choose to buy unpasteurized milk, ask the farmer about their safety practices—things like cleanliness and bacteria testing—before drinking up.