

Disease Investigations Linked to Increased Raw Milk Consumption

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TDH Investigating Cases of Gastrointestinal Disease

NASHVILLE – The Tennessee Department of Health is investigating multiple gastrointestinal disease reports among people who say they consumed raw milk prior to their illness. TDH has confirmed two cases of cryptosporidiosis in individuals in the Chattanooga/Hamilton County Region. Both cases of illness are associated with consumption of raw milk from a dairy cow share program. TDH is interviewing additional participants in the program to determine if other people have been sickened. In recent months, TDH has interviewed individuals about sporadic cases of *Campylobacter* and Shiga-toxin producing *E. coli* who also reported consuming raw milk from different sources.

“Consuming raw milk in the belief it’s healthier than pasteurized milk is a perilous risk that shakes off the possibility of a range of serious and occasionally fatal illnesses for the individuals and anyone they share it with,” said TDH Commissioner John Dreyzehner, MD, MPH. “Our best choice for healthy, nutritious milk is the pasteurized kind. Even if one believes there are health benefits, an upside, is it worth gambling on the downside risk of a serious illness, especially in a child?”

Cow share programs were made legal in Tennessee in 2009, allowing wider access to raw milk. Since that time TDH has had increasing reports of disease and outbreaks linked to raw milk consumption. In 2013, nine Tennessee children became extremely sick with *E. coli* O157 after drinking raw milk. Five of these children required hospitalization and three developed severe, life-threatening kidney problems.

“The Department of Agriculture has a thorough dairy inspection program focused on detecting potential health risks before milk reaches the consumer,” Tennessee Department of Agriculture Commissioner Julius Johnson said. “Legal pasteurization through a licensed dairy facility is the only way to ensure that dairy products are safe to consume. Despite a producer’s best intentions, without pasteurization, bacteria exposure is a real danger.”

Harmful bacteria that can be found in unpasteurized milk from cows, goats and other mammals include *Campylobacter*, *Cryptosporidium*, *E. coli* and *Salmonella*. Common symptoms of illness from drinking contaminated raw milk include vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal cramps, headaches, fever and body aches. While some people sickened with these contaminants may respond to medical treatment, others may suffer irreversible organ damage or death.

“Raw milk is 150 times more likely to cause a foodborne illness than pasteurized milk and can be life-threatening to some, particularly to children. Those who consume raw milk should be aware of the serious health risks involved,” said TDH Deputy State Epidemiologist John Dunn, DVM, PhD. “While some adults may be able to tolerate bacteria found in unpasteurized milk or food products made with raw milk, children, older adults, pregnant women and those with weakened immune systems can be in great danger.

"While it is legal in Tennessee for individuals to consume raw milk from their own animals, it doesn't change the risk to their health," continued Dunn. "The simple fact is all raw milk contains bacteria that pasteurization would destroy. We strongly urge Tennesseans to choose pasteurized foods and beverages when purchasing and consuming dairy products."

To eliminate risk of infection, the Tennessee Department of Health suggests consumers read the labels of all milk and cheese products to make sure they buy only those which have been pasteurized. Pasteurization kills harmful bacteria by simply heating milk for a specific amount of time. Pasteurization has been recognized by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as one of the ten great public health achievements of the 20th century.

Since 1987, the Food and Drug Administration has prohibited distribution of raw milk across state lines for direct sales to consumers. Some people take extreme measures to obtain raw milk, even buying and consuming raw milk labeled as pet food or investing in shared ownership of a milk cow or goat.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has additional information on the risks of raw milk available online at www.cdc.gov/foodsafety/rawmilk/raw-milk-index.html.

The mission of the Tennessee Department of Health is to protect, promote and improve the health and prosperity of people in Tennessee. TDH has facilities in all 95 counties and provides direct services for more than one in five Tennesseans annually as well as indirect services for everyone in the state, including emergency response to health threats, licensure of health professionals, regulation of health care facilities and inspection of food service establishments. Learn more about TDH services and programs at www.tn.gov/health.