

Raw milk health risks under review

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By Ingrid Hipkiss

Reporter

Since the 1950s, New Zealand's commercial milk supply has been pasteurised – treated with heat to kill bacteria – and most of us have swallowed the official position, that untreated milk is potentially dangerous to drink.

But there's a growing trend of consumers wanting their food in a natural state, and that includes milk. They say raw milk is not only safe, it's better for you, and a major study is underway to see if they're right.

Most of us buy our milk pasteurised and from a dairy or supermarket fridge. But for mums like Angela Jones that's changing. She's one of thousands of townies making a regular trek to a trusted farmer to buy raw milk at the farm gate.

"[It is] really just for a lifestyle choice," says Ms Jones. "It's important for me to know where my food is coming from and less processed has got to be better."

Raw milk devotees say it's a natural pro-biotic and boosts immunity and is suitable for children who are lactose intolerant or allergic to treated milk.

"The pasteurisation process actually creates histamines in milk, and that's what a lot of children especially are allergic to," says Debbie Swanick of Organic NZ.

Studies of children raised on farms suggest raw milk protects against allergies and asthma.

Massey University has just begun a \$1.2-million study into the potential health benefits.

"What we are going to do in this study is to assess whether raw milk exposure in an urban sample of children also protects against allergies and asthma," says Professor Jeroen Douwes.

But he says raw milk can harbour dangerous bacteria. That's backed up by the official stance that drinking raw milk poses serious health risks.

"Raw milk contains a number of illness-causing bacteria, bacteria like campylobacter, salmonella, e coli that can be really, really serious," says Carol Barnao of the Ministry of Primary Industries.

She says there are more than 4 million cases of gastro-enteritis in New Zealand every year. The cause of most cases isn't known, but in five years, 79 cases have been officially linked to raw milk.

"I don't believe it has health risks," says Ms Jones. "The milk we have is tested everyday. I have faith and trust in that and I just don't believe we have to have food as heavily processed as what we're being told we do."

The sale of raw milk is controversial. 3 News struggled to find farmers who'd let us film them selling it.

Raw milk sales are banned in countries like Australia and Canada, but it's sold in the UK and some US states. Here, the sale's limited to five litres per person per day. But the Government is currently considering increasing that limit.

In the meantime the raw milk recommendation is spread by word of mouth, and Facebook pages connect customers with co-operative farmers.

"If you have a taste of the raw milk compared to commercial milk it tastes like you're drinking cream," says Ms Jones. "It's just incredible and it's not the cream factor that's the difference. It's the lack of process. It tastes like it should taste."

It is an acquired taste that more people are giving a go.

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