

FACT SHEET

FOOD SAFETY - UNPASTEURIZED/RAW MILK

ISSUE

Citizens express desire for access to illegal unpasteurized/ raw milk and seek removal of the *Public Health Act's* Section 2 (a) from Health Hazards regulation which deems unpasteurized milk to be a health hazard.

KEY FACTS

- Unpasteurized milk – often referred to as raw milk – is consumed as it comes directly from the cow, goat or sheep, without being processed to reduce levels of disease-causing bacteria such as *E. coli*, *Salmonella*, *Listeria*, *Staphylococcus*, and *Campylobacter*.
- Its sale is illegal in Canada¹, and there is no credible or scientific evidence that unpasteurized milk produces any measurable health benefits over pasteurized dairy products.
- Consuming unpasteurized milk presents a serious health hazard, and may result in mild illness, serious disease, or even death, particularly among vulnerable populations including children, immune-compromised individuals, the elderly and pregnant women.
- Some BC citizens ask that unpasteurized milk no longer be deemed a health hazard under the *Public Health Act's* Health Hazards Regulation, citing access in other jurisdictions.
- The *BC Milk Industry Act* prohibits the sale/supply of unpasteurized dairy products². A person may still drink unpasteurized milk from his/her own cow.
- Canadian dairy plants can legally use unpasteurized milk to produce cheese if it is aged for a minimum of 60 days under controlled conditions³. During the aging process, the internal environment of the cheese becomes more acidic, causing harmful bacteria in the milk to be destroyed. However, there is a risk that *E. coli* O157:H7 can adapt to the low acid conditions that form during the manufacturing process, and may survive in low numbers⁴.

Oversight of dairy processing plants

- As of December 8, 2014, the BC Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) Food Protection Services had issued a total of 53 dairy plant licences⁵. There are 26 non-federally registered plants⁶ within BC that are exclusively inspected by BCCDC. Federal inspectors from the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) lead inspections at the 27 federally registered plants⁷.
- BC dairy plants are inspected to ensure that their dairy products are safe and wholesome, and that their operations are in compliance with the *Milk Industry Act* and its regulation.
- All dairy plants are required to submit monthly finished product samples to accredited labs of their choice to verify that the applicable microbiological and chemical standards are met.
- Enforcement can include follow-up inspections, product withdrawal or recall, issuance of a prohibition notice, and suspension of the licence.

¹ Canada, Food and Drug Regulations: C.R.C., c. 870. http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/regulations/C.R.C._c.870/page-87.html#h-74. (Accessed Jan. 22, 2015).

² British Columbia: *Milk Industry Act* 1996: No sale of dairy products unless pasteurized 6 (1).

³ Canada, Food and Drug Regulations: C.R.C., c. 870. http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/regulations/C.R.C._c.870/page-109.html#docCont. (Accessed Jan. 22, 2015).

⁴ Pacheco, F. and Galindo, A. "Microbial safety of raw milk cheeses traditionally made at a pH below 4.7 and with other hurdles limiting pathogen growth." *Current Research, Technology and Education Topics in Applied Microbiology and Microbial Biotechnology* 2. (2010): 1205-1216.

⁵ BCCDC. *Provincially Licensed Dairy Plants in BC*: http://www.bccdc.ca/NR/rdonlyres/BAE39FB-98F7-4F1F-86D3-A7397165A258/0/ProvinciallyLicensedDairyPlantsinBCweb_Dec08_4.pdf (Accessed Jan. 22, 2015).

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *ibid*

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E.coli O157:H7 Outbreak Associated with Gort's Gouda Cheese

- On September 13, 2013, the Public Health Agency of Canada activated a foodborne outbreak committee to investigate a cluster of *E. coli* O157:H7 cases in BC and Alberta. The illnesses were caused by the consumption of contaminated cheese from a Gort's Gouda Cheese Farm operation in Salmon Arm. The operation produces cheese from pasteurized and unpasteurized cow and goat milk. The illnesses began in July and ended in late September.⁸
- CFIA issued a recall notice on September 17, 2013, for Gort's Gouda Cheese products. BCCDC ordered the operation to cease selling or supplying its cheese products.⁹ 28 cases of illnesses were reported across five provinces as part of this outbreak, including 13 cases in BC¹⁰. One of the 13 people impacted in BC died in August 2013¹¹.
- The operation resumed production and distribution of its cheese products on October 21, 2013, after health officials determined it is meeting provincial standards.¹²

Legal Case in BC related to Unpasteurized Milk¹³

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⁸ Provincial Health Services Authority. Confidential Issue Note: September 19, 2013. *Gort's Cheese E. coli O157:H7 Outbreak Investigation*.
⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁰ Public Health Agency of Canada. *Epidemiological information: E. coli O157:H7 illness related to cheese produced by Gort's Gouda Cheese Farm*.
<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/fs-sa/phen-asp/2013/eeoli-epi-info-0913-eng.php> (Accessed Jan. 22, 2015)

¹¹ Provincial Health Services Authority. Confidential Issue Note: September 19, 2013. *Gort's Cheese E. coli O157:H7 Outbreak Investigation*

¹² BCCDC. *Gort's Cheese Allowed to Resume Operations*

<http://www.bccdc.ca/resourcematerials/newsandalerts/news/2013/News/Gort%20Cheese+Facility+Resumption+Operations.htm> (Accessed Jan. 22, 2015)

¹³ Fraser Health. *Confidential Briefing Note – Our Cows Operation*. January 2013.

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FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- N/A

Approved by:

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¹⁴ Supreme Court of BC. *Fraser Health Authority v. Jungersen*, 2013 BCSC 986. <http://www.courts.gov.bc.ca/dh-rtx/SC/13092013BCSC9860ga1.htm> (Accessed Jan 30, 2015)