

Unpasteurized milk has fans despite warnings from officials

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HERNDON, Va. - Like most moms, Cathy Fairbairn makes sure her kids get lots of milk.

Nine-year-old Corinne and 7-year-old Ryan love the stuff. "It's delicious," their mom says.

It also is unpasteurized.

Drinking this kind of milk appalls health officials. They credit pasteurization with preventing countless cases of sickness and death from diseases spread through bacteria in milk.

But Fairbairn, who lives in Herndon, and other advocates of raw milk say pasteurization's scalding heat destroys nutrients, ruins the taste and just is not natural. They have formed their own supply networks to get what they want.

"If you're open to it, you cross this line and then you're part of the other culture," Fairbairn said.

In their books and Web sites, raw milk advocates say that health officials and doctors are narrow-minded bacteria-phobes. One site - www.rawmilk.org - calls nonpasteurized milk "the only healthy milk."

Fairbairn, who came to raw milk in 2000 by attending seminars and reading articles about it, said ordinary milk drinkers "have been fed a line."

The practice also fits a back-to-the-roots lifestyle. Fairbairn, for example, grinds her own grain for the bread she bakes. Natural foods are healthier because they follow the "traditional diets of our ancestors," she said.

Doctors and health officials do not accept the raw milk argument.

"We continue to see outbreaks of foodborne illnesses associated with the consumption of raw milk every year," said John Sheehan, director of the Food and Drug Administration's division of dairy and egg safety.

Unpasteurized milk can be breeding grounds for food poisoning bacteria such as campylobacter, E. coli and salmonella, as well as forms of tuberculosis that can be transmitted from cattle to people.

Fairbairn said her family has not gotten sick. Also, some experts say raw milk is not uniformly dangerous. Sanitary handling from farm to delivery can keep the risk of bacteria down, said Rusty Bishop, director of the Center for Dairy Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

"It's amazing how clean milk is when you look at where it comes from," Bishop said. "If God had done it right, he would have put the teats at the other end of the cow."

Bishop does not drink raw milk. Pasteurization is good health insurance, and the odds of disease can catch up with people who regularly drink raw milk, he said. Countries where more raw milk is consumed have higher rates of food poisoning traced to it, he said.

In the United States, the FDA forbids interstate transportation of raw milk packaged for retail sale, but 28 states allow sales within the state's borders, Sheehan said.

Virginia is not one of the 28, but Fairbairn said she and about 40 other families in northern Virginia have found a way to get their milk anyway. To avoid having to buy milk, they banded together in a loose co-op that owns shares in Jersey cows at Hedgebrook Farm, a small dairy operation near Winchester, Va., in the Shenandoah Valley.

Each \$60 share in the "cow boarding" system entitles the owner to one gallon of milk a week. Shareholders pay for the upkeep of the cows and home delivery of the milk at \$15 per month per share. The farm's owner, Kitty Hockman-Nicholas, said the milk winds up costing them around \$4 per gallon.

It is more trouble than driving to the supermarket for milk. But raw milk advocates say the health benefits are worth it.

They say pasteurization reduces heat-sensitive vitamins such as vitamin C and thiamin and changes some of milk's calcium into a form that is more difficult for the body to use.

Health officials disagree.

"You'll see people claim pasteurized milk is not nutritionally equal to raw milk and that is not so in any appreciable sense," said Sheehan. "It's pretty much FDA's position that the health risks far outweigh the benefits that might accrue."

Health and dairy experts acknowledge that raw milk advocates have a point in their claim that pasteurization changes the taste of milk. Pasteurization's heat cooks a slightly sweeter taste into milk, but it is hard to notice, Bishop said.

In this reporter's taste test in Fairbairn's kitchen, pasteurized milk bought at a local supermarket was a little sweeter, although the milk from the farm's jerseys tasted just a little creamier.

Another taste tester, however, had a stronger opinion. Holding a glass of the product he has been drinking for most of his life, young Ryan Fairbairn declared, "This is the real milk."