



Raw milk cheeses – what you need to know

If you or someone in your family is very young, frail and elderly, pregnant or immune-compromised as a result of ongoing illness, medication or recent hospitalisation, this may affect you.

What is the issue?

Food law has changed to allow some types of raw milk cheeses to be more widely available in New Zealand. Eventually New Zealand manufacturers may also be allowed to produce their own raw milk cheeses as well as other raw milk products.

What is different about raw milk cheeses?

Raw milk cheeses are made from milk that has not undergone enough heat treatment to kill pathogens (organisms which can cause a foodborne illness). Some heat treatments (eg, pasteurisation) raise the temperature of milk enough to kill pathogens which means dairy products produced from this milk are 'low risk'.

Soft raw milk cheeses (eg, Roquefort) are of higher risk for some consumers than hard raw milk cheeses as their additional moisture allows pathogens to grow more easily.

For most healthy New Zealanders the risk of eating raw milk cheeses such as Roquefort will be no different from eating higher risk foods already on sale here (eg, salami, raw fish).

But those who fall into vulnerable population groups should avoid them.

What are the risks associated with Roquefort cheese?

Although production methods of Roquefort minimise the risks, they are not lowered to the same level as pasteurised dairy products. Illnesses caused by the pathogens *Listeria monocytogenes* and *E.coli* have been traced to raw milk products in other countries. In high numbers, these pathogens can cause illnesses with symptoms ranging from mild through to severe. Some people are more likely to be badly affected than others.



Does it affect me?

People who fall into any of the following categories – babies and toddlers under three, the frail elderly, expectant mums and those whose immune systems may be weak due to some types of prolonged illness, medication or an operation – should avoid eating raw milk cheeses.

How can I tell the difference between raw milk and pasteurised cheeses?

When buying cheese, check the label. Raw milk cheeses will be labelled as containing unpasteurised milk. If you're eating at a restaurant and you're unsure about the cheese you're served, check with the waiting staff.

How can I keep myself safe from possible risks?

At home, it's important to follow good kitchen and personal hygiene procedures to ensure raw milk products don't cross-contaminate other ready-to-eat foods.

Remember to:

- use separate knives and chopping boards for raw milk cheeses and foods that are ready-to-eat (where there is no cooking step to kill pathogens)
- keep raw milk cheeses wrapped in your fridge, separate from other cheeses and ready-to-eat foods
- ensure your fridge is operating between 2 and 4°C
- make sure you buy raw milk cheeses from a reputable supplier who has stored or transported it correctly to minimise pathogen growth
- be sure to observe use-by dates. Throw away any unused product if it has exceeded its use-by date.

Where can I find out more about food safety for vulnerable groups?

NZFSA has published a number of booklets:

- Food Safety when you have low immunity
- Food Safety in pregnancy
- Eating safely when you have food allergies

These can be downloaded from our website (www.nzfsa.govt.nz), or you can order them by emailing info@nzfsa.govt.nz or calling 0800 NZFSA1 (0800 693 721). There is also more general information on food safety on our website, or you can visit the website of the Foodsafe Partnership: www.foodsafe.org.nz