

NEWS/BUSINESS

Study examines E. coli outbreak, casts doubt on raw milk cheese 60-day aging policies

DES MOINES, Iowa — A recently-published scientific study casts doubt on the safety of certain raw milk cheeses aged at least 60 days.

A study published in the February edition of *The Journal of Food Protection* looks at a 2013 outbreak of *E. coli* infections in Canada that were linked to aged raw milk Gouda. Between July 12 and Sept. 29, 2013, 29 individuals in five Canadian provinces became ill following infection with the same strain of *E. coli* O157:H7. Five people were hospitalized and one died. Ninety percent of the case patients reported eating Gouda, which was aged for a minimum of 60 days, from a dairy plant in British Columbia. Findings indicated that raw milk was the primary source of the *E. coli*, which persisted through production and the minimum 60-day aging period.

The authors, who are affiliated with a number of Canadian public health agencies and universities, note that this was the third outbreak caused by *E. coli* O157:H7 traced to Gouda made with raw milk in North America.

"These findings provide further evidence that a 60-day ripening period cannot ensure die-off of pathogens that might be present in raw milk Gouda cheese after production and have triggered an evaluation of processing conditions, physicochemical parameters and options to mitigate the risk of *E. coli* O157:H7 infection associated with raw milk Gouda cheese produced in Canada," the authors write.

In Canada, except for Quebec, raw milk cheeses are required to be aged a minimum of 60 days. FDA also requires any raw milk cheese sold in the United States to be aged at least 60 days.

"The outbreak is an interesting case study, and it certainly increased FDA's focus on raw milk cheeses produced in the U.S. However, after its own subsequent sampling assignment testing legally produced and aged raw milk cheeses, FDA's own findings indicate that raw milk cheeses produced and sold under current FDA guidelines — including the 60-day aging rule — can be consumed without unnecessary risk,"

says Nora Weiser, executive director, American Cheese Society.

John Allan, vice president of regulatory affairs and international standards, International Dairy Foods Association (IDFA), says IDFA believes it is important that any future changes to the U.S. 60-day minimum aging period for cheese made from raw milk should be based on

sound scientific evidence.

"We also recognize that with the advent of the Food and Drug Administration's Food Safety Modernization Act, there are now new, robust food safety requirements in place — outside of individual standards of identity — that will go a long way in bolstering assurances of food safety," Allan adds. CMN

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nutritious, it also is a source of allergies and lactose intolerance, and that the presence of various pathogens like *Salmonella spp* and *E. coli* O157:H7 in milk have been associated with disease outbreaks around the world.

Beth Briczinski, vice president for dairy foods and nutrition, NMPF, says media attention to this claim is disconcerting and has to be addressed.

"Cow's milk is one of the most regulated food products on the market today," she says. "To publish such an egregious claim in a scientific journal could damage consumer trust in this great beverage, which is why we insist that the study's authors issue a correction to the journal article and revise its press release immediately."

The NMPF letter notes that raw milk is a key vehicle in the transmission of human pathogens like *E. coli*, *Listeria* and *Salmonella*, and that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have reported that more than 70 percent of foodborne outbreaks involving dairy are attributed to raw milk, which is illegal in Canada and in many U.S. states.

"There is no basis for your statement linking milk consumption to worldwide foodborne outbreaks," the letter says. "Such a comment has the potential to do incredible, unjustified harm to our industry and has the potential to cause fear in consumers who are seeking nutrient-dense and safe products for themselves and their families."

Following the letter, McGill updated its press release to make the claim more specific to raw dairy products, saying, "The presence of various pathogens like *Bacillus spp*, *Listeria spp*, *Salmonella spp* and *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 in milk and milk products, especially made from raw, unpasteurized milks have been known to be sources of foodborne illnesses and diarrhoeal diseases around the world."

NMPF says the *Journal of Food Science and Technology* also invited it to submit a letter to the editor with its concerns, which NMPF says it plans to do Monday.

"This episode is a perfect example of why NMPF engages in efforts to restrict access to the sales and distribution of raw milk," says Chris Galen, senior vice president, communications, NMPF. "As

this report shows, if even supposedly well-educated food safety experts don't distinguish between raw and pasteurized products when communicating about dairy, how can the public?"

A number of U.S. states are considering legislation to make raw milk more easily accessible for consumers, including most recently Virginia and Iowa. The Virginia bill, HB 825, would allow consumers to purchase raw milk through herd-sharing ownership agreements in the state and remove existing regulations prohibiting sales of raw milk for consumption. Currently, herd share programs in Virginia are unregulated. This week the bill was scheduled to be heard by Virginia's House Subcommittee on Agriculture, Chesapeake and Natural Resources, but there was a vote to strike it from the docket.

NMPF and the International Dairy Foods Association sent a letter last month to Virginia's Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services opposing this proposed legislation.

"Creating herd ownership agreements through HB 825 is a clear loophole — allowing raw milk producers to skirt Virginia state law requiring all milk and milk products in the state be pasteurized for sale to final consumers, retailers or foodservice establishments — and putting vulnerable consumers at risk," the groups say.

The Iowa bill, HF 2055, would allow dairy farmers in the state to sell raw milk directly to consumers and outline labeling requirements. Iowa's Local Government Subcommittee recommended the bill for passage Jan. 30. CMN

ANCO

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in the United States.

"For decades, ANCO has been one of the most established importers of specialty cheese to the U.S.," says Tom Gellert, president of Atalanta. "Together with Atalanta's own rich history, we have a unique opportunity to solidify our position as leaders in the specialty cheese and deli categories."

He adds that Atalanta and its parent company, The Gellert Global Group, are looking forward to gaining great synergies from ANCO's network of strong relationships with suppliers, customers and the addition of a great team of people. CMN

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