

An assessment of available information on raw milk cheeses and human disease 2000–2010

MAF has proposed a framework that allows a wider variety of raw milk products to be sold and produced in New Zealand. Raw milk products are inherently higher risk foods than pasteurised products, because they have not undergone sufficient heat treatment to kill pathogens, which can cause foodborne illness.

Raw milk cheese represents only about 10 percent of cheese sold worldwide, however, raw milk cheeses account for 70 percent of all outbreaks linked to cheese consumption.

An examination of the human disease evidence associated with the consumption of raw milk and raw milk cheeses and an agreed list of pathogens was carried out by Massey University for NZFSA in 2008. The present review is complimentary to the study of 2008 and is specific to disease outbreaks related to raw milk cheeses. This study reports on case material dating from 1 January 2000 up to 31 December 2010, and covers all available information on cases in which raw milk cheeses were implicated in human disease. It was undertaken to inform the MAF risk management framework for raw milk cheeses and the development of appropriate risk communication strategies, and to be a repository of comprehensive up-to-date information on morbidity and mortality associated with their consumption. The confirmation of a causal link between consumption of raw milk cheeses and any of the pathogens reviewed was not a part of this study.

It is evident from the materials reviewed in this report that, despite ongoing warnings by regulatory agencies in many countries, disease outbreaks attributable directly to the consumption of cheese manufactured from raw milk occur. In many cases, the human illness resulted from the failure to implement basic hygiene measures during cheese manufacture or the consumption of cheese illegally produced or imported.

Note that caution should be exercised when analysing and interpreting worldwide epidemiological data as surveillance systems vary widely and outbreaks of foodborne illness may be underreported.

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