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## Beware E. coli when drinking raw milk: study

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By [Frederik Joelving](#)

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - A government investigation published this month has tied raw milk consumption to a 2008 outbreak of E. coli in Connecticut, which landed four people in the hospital with life-threatening illnesses.

It also puts a price tag on the outbreak: \$413,402. And it hints the infection spread beyond those who drank the allegedly tainted milk.

The report is the latest to warn against raw or unpasteurized milk, which experts say is becoming increasingly popular in the U.S.

"There has been a movement away from highly processed foods to organic foods," said Bill Marler, a Seattle-based lawyer who represented three of the sickened people in Connecticut. He recently settled the cases with the Simsbury farm that made the milk and the grocery store that sold it, but would not give the amount of the settlement.

"There are so many internet sites out there that talk about raw milk as if it cured everything from autism to erectile dysfunction," said Marler.

One such site is run by Randolph Jonsson, a raw milk proponent who was not involved in the Connecticut outbreak.

"Milk straight from the udder, a sort of 'stem cell' of foods, was used as medicine to treat, and frequently cure some serious chronic diseases," he notes on his website.

But researchers say there is scant support for such health claims, and that the risks are much clearer.

"There are no health benefits from drinking raw milk that cannot be obtained from drinking pasteurized milk that is free of disease-causing bacteria," said Hannah Gould, of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta.

"Pasteurization can decrease the activity of some vitamins, including thiamine, vitamin B12, and vitamin C, but milk is a relatively minor source of these vitamins."

### CONN. CASES JOIN HUNDREDS HOSPITALIZED

"Less than 1% of the dairy products consumed in the United States are unpasteurized, yet more than 50% of dairy-associated outbreaks are linked to unpasteurized products," said Gould, who was not involved in the new investigation.

From 1993 to 2006, she added in an e-mail, outbreaks related to raw milk and cheese and yogurt made from it have been tied to 1571 illnesses, 202 hospitalizations and two deaths.

In the new study of the 2008 cases, Dr. Alice Guh, also at CDC, and colleagues identified seven cases of confirmed E. coli infection, either via lab tests for a toxic strain of the bacteria -- E. coli O157:NM -- or via diagnosis of hemolytic uremic syndrome, a disease caused by it.

Five people ended up at the hospital. Although none died, they racked up an average medical bill of almost \$73,000 each.

All had diarrhea, and one adult had so-called thrombotic thrombocytopenic purpura, which can lead to brain damage and in some cases death. Three kids had hemolytic uremic syndrome, which destroys red blood cells and causes short-term kidney failure.

"Children represent one of the population groups at highest risk for experiencing severe illness," Guh told Reuters Health by e-mail.

She said the farm had "acceptable milking and sanitation procedures," demonstrating that the contamination wasn't due to a lack of hygiene.

"You can absolutely do the best you can in producing raw milk, but because of the location of the cow's anus to the cow's udder, it makes it really difficult for the bacteria not to get into the milk," said Marler. "You can't tell a cow not to poop when it gets milked."

Five of the people with confirmed infections had consumed raw milk from the same dairy farm in Simsbury, Connecticut. Two others, a pair of toddlers, had been playing with a kid who also had drunk the milk.

### 'RISKS FAR OUTWEIGH THE BENEFITS'

"My concern is that some consumers are not fully aware of the risks and may be misled by unsupported claims," said Dennis D'Amico, a researcher at the Vermont Institute for Artisan Cheese at the University of Vermont in Burlington.

