

## Foods to Avoid for People at Higher Risk of Food-borne Illness

The Public Health Agency of Canada estimates that there are about 4 million cases of food poisoning, in Canada, every year. Some people with weakened immune systems are at higher risk of food-borne illness. Certain foods are riskier than others. For example, “ready to eat” foods that have not been pasteurized such as some deli meats or soft cheeses may be more likely to make you sick.

### Who is at higher risk of food-borne illness?

There are several groups of people who are at higher risk of food-borne illness because they have weakened or undeveloped immune systems, including:

- elderly people;
- people with AIDS, cancer, kidney disease, and certain other chronic diseases;
- those with autoimmune disorders, such as lupus;
- those who have had surgery to remove their spleen;
- those being treated with immune-suppressing medications;
- children under 2 years of age;
- pregnant women and their unborn or newborn babies; and
- those with a history of alcohol or drug use.

### Which foods are of greater concern and what can I do to decrease my risk?

If you are at higher risk of food-borne illness there are steps you can take to decrease the risk of getting sick from contaminated food.

You can either avoid the following foods, or if you choose to eat them, make sure you cook or heat treat them.

#### **Undercooked meat and fish**

Make sure you properly cook raw meats and seafood such as chicken and turkey, beef, pork, fish and shellfish.

#### **Raw and smoked seafood**

Cook refrigerated raw and smoked seafood, such as smoked salmon, before eating it. Do not eat sushi containing raw fish.

#### **Undercooked shellfish**

Do not eat undercooked or uncooked bivalve shellfish, such as clams, oysters, mussels, and scallops. Harmful germs may be found in the waters with shellfish. These germs tend to build up in bivalve shellfish due to the way these animals feed.

#### **Deli meats and hot dogs**

Deli meats and hot dogs are not always cooked thoroughly when produced in the factory. It is possible that some harmful germs may survive and grow. You can reduce the risk by not eating deli meats and hot dogs, or by cooking them well.

#### **Pâtés and meat spreads**

Liver pâté has been linked to illness outbreaks. Do not eat liver pate.

#### **Unpasteurized milk and dairy products**

Do not drink unpasteurized milk or eat unpasteurized dairy products.

It is a myth that unpasteurized (raw) milk is healthier than pasteurized milk. Raw milk can contain disease causing bacteria and is

especially dangerous for children and immunocompromised individuals.

### **Soft cheese**

Depending on how they are made, some cheeses are at higher risk of contamination. Soft cheeses, such as Camembert, Brie, feta, and Mexican style cheeses such as queso blanco or queso fresco, can cause illness in people with weak immune systems.

Hard cheeses, processed cheeses, cream cheese and cottage cheese are a safer alternative.

### **Undercooked eggs**

Do not eat uncooked or undercooked eggs.

### **Uncooked sprouts**

Raw or undercooked sprouted seeds such as bean sprouts, radish sprouts, alfalfa sprouts, and others are especially risky for carrying germs that can cause food poisoning or illness. If cooked properly, these are not a risk.

### **Unpasteurized fruit juice or cider**

Do not drink unpasteurized juices or ciders unless you boil it for at least 2 minutes beforehand.

### **Honey**

Do not feed honey to infants younger than 1 year old, as they are at risk for germs that can cause infant botulism.

### **What can I do to make fresh fruits and vegetables safe to eat?**

Cook fruits and vegetables, especially if grown in or on the ground.

If fruits and vegetables are eaten raw, they should be washed well with clean water or peeled before eating. Peeled fruits and vegetables, such as bananas and oranges, are less of a risk than those eaten unpeeled.

Take extra care when washing leafy green produce, such as parsley or lettuce. These are harder to clean thoroughly.

### **For More Information**

For information on pregnancy and food safety visit the BC Centre for Disease Control Pregnancy and Food Safety web page at [www.bccdc.ca/health-info/food-your-health/food-safety](http://www.bccdc.ca/health-info/food-your-health/food-safety).

For more information on food safety, see the following HealthLinkBC Files:

- [HealthLinkBC File #02 E. coli Infection](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #03 Pasteurized and Raw Milk](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #17 Salmonellosis](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #56 Preventing Water-Borne Infections For People with Weakened Immune Systems](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #59a Food Safety: Easy Steps to Make Food Safe](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #59b Food Safety for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #59c Food Safety: Instructions on Food Labels](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #72 Unpasteurized Fruit Juices and Ciders: A Potential Health Risk](#)
- [HealthLinkBC File #75 Listeriosis](#)

For more HealthLink BC File topics, visit [www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthfiles](http://www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthfiles) or your local public health unit.

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