

## **Testimony of David Gumpert before Vermont legislature, April 10, 2014.**

Rep. Partridge, Rep. Lawrence, and other members of the House Agriculture and Forest Products Committee:

My name is David Gumpert, and I am a journalist and the author of two books on raw milk and food rights. The first book, published in 2009, is *The Raw Milk Revolution: Behind America's Emerging Battle Over Food Rights*. The second book is *Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Food Rights: The Escalating Battle Over Who Decides What We Eat*.

I also write a blog that focuses heavily on studies and government actions on raw milk, [www.thecompletepatient.com](http://www.thecompletepatient.com). It attracts hundreds of readers each day.

I previously worked as a reporter with *The Wall Street Journal* and an editor at *The Harvard Business Review* and *Inc. Magazine*. I have authored or co-authored seven books on various aspects of entrepreneurship and small business.

I monitor the politics and science of raw milk nationally. I like to think I bring a sense of objectivity and context to this issue, which tends to be highly emotional. I want to discuss here today the subject, "Raw Milk Safety: What Are the Real Risks?"

I will try to answer three related questions:

1. Why is raw milk consumption growing?
2. Is raw milk inherently unsafe?
3. If it isn't inherently unsafe, how risky is raw milk?

The subject of food safety is mostly discussed in terms of the risk of pathogens in our food. But more and more people are afraid of the hormones, the antibiotics, the GMO feed, the soy feed, the new breed of antibiotic-resistant pathogens, the artificial sweeteners, and the various processing associated with so much of our food...and how all these might contribute to the exploding rates of auto-immune disorders--allergies, asthma, crohns.

So they are seeking out unprocessed and untreated foods and fresh unprocessed milk is a big part of that.

We know anecdotally from growing interest in legislative efforts like that here in Vermont that interest in raw milk is increasing. The only hard data we have on the number of raw milk consumers comes from a 2007 in-depth survey underwritten by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control about the main foods we eat. The agency discovered that 3% of those surveyed in ten different states consume raw milk. That translates into nearly 10 million Americans.

As you'll see in a little while, this is a very important number.

### **Which brings me to the second question: Is raw milk inherently unsafe?**

If you listen to many in the conventional dairy industry along with federal and state public health policy makers (the FDA and CDC), they will argue that raw milk is inherently unsafe. In other words, there is no way raw milk can be produced safely, no matter what steps farmers take.

If you agree with that proposition, then raw milk wouldn't be consumed. It wouldn't have been a holy food alluded to frequently in the Bible. It wouldn't have sustained people around the world for thousands of years. We had a period in this country during the Industrial Revolution when raw milk wasn't produced safely, and many people, including children, died as a result. But we have learned much about how disease spreads, the need for sanitation and refrigeration, and animal husbandry since those terrible days of the late 1800s and early 1900s.

All you have to do is look around today, and you'll see that millions of Americans are drinking raw milk every day. Many of your friends and neighbors are regularly buying it and feeding it to their families. Maybe even some of you or members of your family. If raw milk were inherently unsafe, these people would be getting seriously ill on a regular basis.

But that isn't happening. Quite the contrary. There hasn't been a single reported illness from Vermont in at least three years. The same holds true for New Hampshire, Maine, and Massachusetts. New Hampshire and Maine both have much more liberal laws than Vermont with regard to raw milk availability, allowing retail sales as well as farmers market sales. Massachusetts allows unlimited sale of raw milk direct from permitted farms.

Even with that track record, though, I am not suggesting to you that people don't very occasionally get sick from raw milk, and that we shouldn't be concerned about improving safety. We definitely need to address that reality.

**That brings me to the third question, the one people ask most often:  
Assuming raw milk isn't inherently unsafe, then how risky is it?**

Let me begin by making the point that *all* foods can make us sick. We've had people killed or hospitalized by everything from ground beef to peanut butter to raw spinach to pasteurized milk.

In 2012, we had 32 people killed, 1 miscarriage, and 113 sickened, some with lasting problems, just by cantaloupe. And that wasn't the first serious outbreak for cantaloupe. It has been sickening and killing people for a couple decades.

No one has suggested banning cantaloupe or hamburgers, spinach, or peanut butter, or even limiting availability.

We've even had deaths from pasteurized milk, which is supposedly guaranteed safe. In Massachusetts, where I'm from, three people died and one woman suffered a miscarriage in 2007 when they drank pasteurized milk

There hasn't been a death from raw milk at least since the 1980s. (The CDC will frequently say there were two deaths, but those two were from illegal queso fresco cheese produced in a bathtub, from raw milk not intended to be served raw.)

Yet there is much more fear mongering about raw milk than any other food. Opponents will show photos of children on life support to suggest that raw milk is the only food that makes young children very sick. It isn't. We have two young children in Oklahoma on life support at this very moment—they got sick from food or contact with farm animals at a state fair. It's terribly unfortunate, but it happens.

To understand the real scope of what the opponents suggest is a huge raw milk problem, we need to look at the macro data. You shouldn't make policy based on a very few scary videos and photos.

When you look at the macro data, you find it's not nearly as scary as you would expect.

When you examine CDC data over the last decade, you find that there are between 25 and 175 reported illnesses from raw milk each year. In 2008 there were 132, in 2011 there were 50. There is no discernible trend up or down.

So what I've done is taken a typical recent year for both raw milk illnesses, and total foodborne illnesses as reported by the CDC. So we are comparing apples and apples.

\*In 2008, there were 23,000 total foodborne illnesses reported by CDC.

\*132 came from raw milk and raw milk cheese.

\*One half of one per cent of the total reported illnesses were from raw milk.

Now, remember back to that earlier number I quoted, about nearly 10 million raw milk drinkers, 3% of consumers? Yet they only account for one-half of one per cent of the reported foodborne illnesses.

Nearly one-third--some 7,000 of the 23,000 illnesses-- came from poultry, beef, and fish.

I want to add one more observation: the CDC and FDA will never ever present the data to you in the straightforward understandable way I am presenting it. They will give you total numbers for a five or eight year period without breaking them down by year or location, to make the situation sound very dire; they will give you outlandish stats, like claiming that raw milk is 150 times more dangerous than pasteurized milk, and not explain that the number is driven way up because they are talking about outbreaks rather than actual illnesses.

Chris Kresser a noted nutritionist, two years ago did a highly detailed statistical analysis associated with the risk of getting sick from raw milk, using CDC data. He concluded that the risk of getting sick from raw milk is one in 94,000, versus one in 888,000 for pasteurized milk--both pretty remote.

One very important point about these odds—most of the illnesses from raw milk or pasteurized milk, as from other foods, are mild. People get stomach upset for a few days and then recover and resume their lives.

As Kresser puts it:

“The statistic we should be more concerned with is hospitalizations for serious illnesses such as kidney failure and hemolytic uremic syndrome (HUS) caused by unpasteurized milk. This does happen, and children and the elderly are particularly vulnerable and more likely to experience a serious illness. That said, hospitalizations from raw milk are **extremely rare**. During the 2000 – 2007 period, there were **12 hospitalizations** for illnesses associated with raw fluid milk. That’s an **average of 1.5 per year**. With approximately 9.4 million people drinking raw milk, that means you have about a **1 in 6 million chance of being hospitalized from drinking raw milk**.

“To put this in perspective, according to the **U.S. Department of Transportation**, you have a roughly **1 in 8,000** chance of dying in a motor vehicle accident if you live in the U.S. Therefore, you have a **750 times greater chance of dying in a car crash** than becoming hospitalized from drinking raw milk.”

We’ve been fortunate in New England that we have had little experience with serious illnesses from raw milk. I am aware of only one outbreak in this entire six-state region over the last 15 years or more that required hospitalizations—six years ago, there were five individuals, including three children, who were sickened from E.coli O157:H7 in Connecticut. Everyone recovered, and the dairy implicated, which was actually run by a small town there, has since shut down.

The reality is that if raw milk were as dangerous as the vets and some of the public health people say, consumers wouldn’t be clamoring for it. No one wants to serve their families unsafe food. One reason more and more people seek out raw milk is that they don’t believe the warnings from the public health and agriculture bureaucrats. They have tried to scare us once too often that the sky is falling.

I hope that you pass comprehensive raw milk reforms as requested by Vermont farmers, and allow wider raw milk access to the citizens of Vermont who want it.

Thank you.