



STATE OF MARYLAND

DHMH PRESS RELEASE

Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Warning Issued Against Some Mexican Cheese

Unpasteurized cheese may lead to a form of tuberculosis

BALTIMORE, MD (December 12, 2005) -- Several types of cheese imported from Mexico may be contaminated with *Mycobacterium bovis*, which causes tuberculosis (TB), according to the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DHMH).

The types of cheese, including *queso fresco*, may be unpasteurized and may also be imported from Mexico and illegally sold without approval by the DHMH Office of Food Protection and Consumer Health Services.

“People should be aware that unpasteurized cheese could be contaminated with disease causing bacteria,” said DHMH Secretary S. Anthony McCann. “Parents should not feed unpasteurized cheese to their children because serious complications like intestinal illness and TB meningitis can be a result.”

Five cases of *M. bovis* tuberculosis have been identified among Maryland children over the past 18 months. One of these children died from *M. bovis* complications. Although the specific cause of disease is unknown, all patients were known to consume soft cheeses imported from Mexico. Unpasteurized soft cheeses have been previously associated as a source for *M. bovis*.

“The take home message is to make sure the dairy products you buy are labeled ‘pasteurized,’” Secretary McCann said. “If a dairy product does not have that label, don’t purchase or consume it – and dispose of any products you have that are not labeled as ‘pasteurized.’”

Queso Fresco is the most common type of soft cheese manufactured with unpasteurized milk. It originates from Central American countries, including Mexico, Nicaragua and Honduras. Because it is made from unpasteurized milk, eating the cheese can cause infectious diseases in addition to TB, including listeriosis, salmonella poisoning and brucellosis.

It may be illegally sold at stores, at flea markets, from the back of trucks, or by door-to-door salespersons.

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DHMH reminds consumers that dairy products that are imported may not be manufactured or packaged in compliance with the federal Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) strict regulations; and consuming these products may endanger your health.

DHMH has also alerted physicians and medical institutions to consider the diagnosis of tuberculosis caused by *M. bovis*, and to ask children or parents of children with TB like symptoms about consuming unpasteurized milk products. Physicians should report cases to their local health department TB programs. They can call the DHMH Division of TB Control with questions at 410-767-6698.

Questions concerning the regulation and manufacturing of cheese in Maryland can be referred to the Division of Milk Control at 410-767-8429.

An FDA advisory about *queso fresco* can be found at <http://www.fda.gov/bbs/topics/news/2005/NEW01165.html>. To look up basic facts sheets on *M. bovis* for patients and physicians, go to the DHMH TB web site at <http://edcp.org/tb/>.

Facts About *M. bovis*

M. bovis commonly causes diseases in cattle and other animals but may cause illness in humans through eating unpasteurized milk products made from infected cattle. It is more likely to cause tuberculosis in parts of the body other than the lungs. General symptoms of *M. bovis* tuberculosis may include fever, night sweats and weight loss. Other symptoms may manifest themselves depending upon the part of the body affected by the disease; e.g., infection of the lungs may be associated with coughing; lymph node infection may cause swelling of the neck; and gastrointestinal infection (GI) may cause abdominal pain and swelling, as well as diarrhea. GI symptoms often occur in very young children with *M. bovis* tuberculosis, so it is imperative that pediatricians conduct a careful and complete medical history of eating unpasteurized milk products. There are antibiotics that must be taken for many months to treat illness caused by *M. bovis* infection. In some instances, a person may die if the disease is left untreated. .

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