

Milk Supply Safe

COLLEGE PARK, Md. — "Drink your milk, it's good for you" is a phrase familiar to most of us from childhood. But is it true?

Doubts were first raised in December, when the Wall Street Journal published the results of a survey it had commissioned, which suggested that the American milk supply is contaminated by antibiotic residues. Follow-up tests by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) produced conflicting results.

"It's not surprising that consumers are confused," said Dr. Mark A. Kantor, a food and nutrition specialist with the University of Maryland Cooperative Extension Service (MCES). "But if they examine all the facts, I think they'll see that there's no cause for alarm."

He explained the situation this way: The Wall Street Journal used a new test method called Charm II to screen samples of milk from 50 supermarkets in 10 cities across the country. Nearly four out of 10 samples (38 percent) tested positive for antibiotics or sulfa drugs. When FDA scientists used the same test on their own nationwide sample of milk, they got an even higher positive reading for antibiotic contamination -- 51 percent. But when they tested the same samples using more sophisticated techniques, they found no evidence of any drug residues.

This comes as no surprise, said MCES Dairy Production Specialist Dr. James T. Marshall.

"The FDA's testing methods are very specific," he said. "They not only let you know whether or not there are drugs in the milk, but they also tell you exactly which drugs are present. The Charm II

test can't do that; it can only identify classes of drugs."

Marshall also thinks caution on the part of farmers and self-regulation by the dairy industry make the risk of drug contamination unlikely.

"Cows, like people, do get sick," Marshall said, "and farmers and veterinarians give them antibiotics just like physicians prescribe antibiotics for sick patients. But most farmers use antibiotics carefully and conscientiously."

"The industry spends millions of dollars to test milk samples," Marshall said. "Milk that tests positive for drug residues never makes it to the processing plant."

But even if some milk with antibiotic residues does slip past the inspection system, that doesn't mean there's a widespread problem in the dairy industry, Kantor said.

"Milk in one carton is a blend of milk from many different cows," he explained. "It's theoretically possible that if even one cow in hundreds or thousands were given antibiotics, trace amounts could show up in some cartons. But that doesn't mean the milk supply is unsafe."

And to ensure that the milk supply remains safe, the FDA plans to step up its regulatory efforts. It is to continue to regularly monitor pasteurized milk and will make sure that individual states use proper, approved testing procedures. Agency personnel are to also conduct educational programs on proper drug usage for farmers.

Consequently, Marshall and Kantor both emphasized that there is no reason for consumers to stop drinking milk.

"It's one of the best sources of calcium, it's an excellent source of protein and it provides a variety of vitamins and other minerals,"

Kantor said. "Lowfat and skim milk are particularly beneficial because of their reduced fat content."

Marshall added that "the health risks of not drinking milk are far greater than any possible risks encountered by drinking it."

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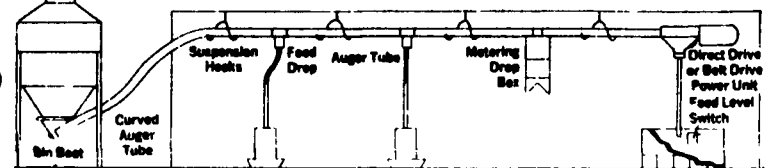
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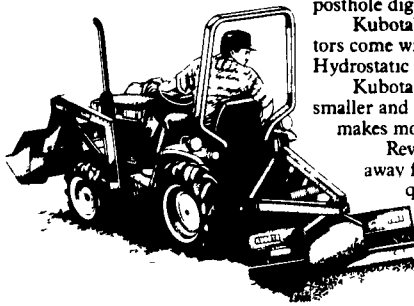
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