For the Love of Cheese! Why Are Pregnant Women Told to Avoid Soft Cheese?

Cheese is as old as modern mankind, with clues about its existence reaching all the way back to 8,000 BC when the first sheep and goats were domesticated by our ancestors (www.historyofcheese.com). And since cheese has been around for so long, it is now one of the most popular and beloved foods throughout the world. So, it did not come as a surprise to me that many who are pregnant and breastfeeding ask MotherToBaby about eating cheese all the time! On our texting service alone (855-999-3525), we have received over 400 questions about cheese in the past few years!

Here are some of the recent questions we have received at MotherToBaby:

- "Am I allowed to eat cream cheese on toast?"
- "Is raw milk cheese from the USA OK?"
- "Can I eat goat cheese while breastfeeding?"
- "Is it OK to eat feta cheese during pregnancy?"
- "Can I continue to eat queso cheese on a burrito or nachos while pregnant?"
- "Is unpasteurized cheese OK to eat if it's been cooked on a pizza?"

When you start researching cheese, you can fall into a rabbit hole on kinds of cheese: hard versus soft, pasteurized or not, Mexican verses Italian? The questions are endless. There are over 1800 different kinds of cheese, divided into 7 categories (www.Funtrivia.com):

- Fresh Cheeses: Banon, Ricotta, Feta, Cottage cheese, Cream cheese, etc.
- Natural Rind: Sancerre, Chabichou, Crottin de Chavignol, etc.
- Soft White Cheese: Camembert, Brie, Chevre Log, etc.
- Semi-Soft: Edam, Pont L'Eveque, St Nectaire, Tomme de Savoie, Langres, Carre de L'Est, Epoisses, etc.

- Hard Cheeses: Cheddar, Parmigiano Reggiano, Gruyere, Manchego, etc.
- Blue Cheeses: Stilton, Roquefort, Gorgonzola, Maytag Blue, Cashel Blue, etc.
- Flavored Cheeses: Cornish Yarg, Gouda with Cumin, Stilton with Apricots, Devon Garland, etc.

So, what is the bottom line for you if you are pregnant or breastfeeding?

First, check to see if the cheese has been pasteurized or not. Look at the label and you will find that most types of packaged cheese or cheese products sold in America have been pasteurized or heat treated. Pasteurization is defined as a process in which both packaged and non-packaged foods (such as cheese and milk) are treated with moderate heat, usually up to 212 °F, to eliminate pathogens and extend shelf life. If the cheese has gone through pasteurization, then any increased risk for bacteria or other pathogens is very small, and the product isn't considered to increase risks if eaten during pregnancy and breastfeeding. Of course, keep an eye on the fresh or sell-by date, and keep the product properly refrigerated. Cheese that has not been pasteurized has an increased risk for bacteria such as Listeria. See our fact sheet at Listeria Infection (Listeriosis) – MotherToBaby for more information. If the cheese has not been pasteurized, but has been cooked or heated prior to eating, then there also is little increased risk. Plus, cheese that has been dried, such as parmesan cheese, has a longer shelf life and no known increased risk for bacteria.

One of the most common questions about cheese when pregnant and breastfeeding is about the difference between hard and soft cheese. Hard cheese has been ripened longer and is drier, having a lower water content. Whereas soft cheese is younger or fresher, with a higher moisture content. The higher moisture content in soft cheese can allow for more growth of bacteria. That is why it is a good idea to be sure that soft cheeses are either heated prior to eating or have been pasteurized at the time of production (again, pasteurization is a process to kill bacteria). Most soft cheeses in the U.S. have undergone this process by FDA pasteurization law — so look at the label to be sure and be aware of any possible increased risks if unpasteurized!

Cheese is rich in protein and minerals such as calcium and phosphorus. During pregnancy and while breastfeeding, cheese can be part of your good diet. Some cheese types, such as hard cheese, are higher in fat. So, do watch the fat content if cheese is part of your daily diet! Just follow a few simple rules about checking for pasteurization and being sure the cheese product is heated or has been cooked prior to eating if it was not pasteurized. And then, enjoy eating cheese without worry during pregnancy and breastfeeding! If you have any cheese related questions during pregnancy, or any other exposure questions, be sure to contact MotherToBaby! We will be happy to help you!

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Questions? Call 866.626.6847 | Text 855.999.3525 | Email or Chat at MotherToBaby.org.

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