

From Barn to Fridge: 6 Tips For Safely Handling Raw Milk

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1. **Clean it-** Before sitting down on my stool to milk, I wipe off Miss Oakley's udder with a hot, wet towel. She likes to lay in the mud, so sometimes it takes a bit of elbow grease to get her teats clean and pink again. Some folks use bleach to wash their cow's udder, but I can't stand that stuff, so hot water is good enough for me.

After washing her down, I spray the first 2-3 squirts of milk from each teat onto the ground (*Some folks prefer to spray it into a small cup*). The reason for this is to flush out any bacteria or dirt that may be in the tip of the teat.

2. **Contain it-** Next, I grab my stainless steel milk bucket. The type of container you use to store your raw milk is very important. Plastic is a big no-no for me, since it's very difficult to properly clean, AND it tends to hold onto off-smells and tastes. You don't want to bring a glass container out into the barn, since it will shatter the first time your cow (or goat) gets fidgety.

Stainless steel buckets can be a little spendy, but trust me, they are worth the investment. They are easy to sanitize, and will survive lots of kicks from a persnickety cow. And make sure you get one with a lid- my lid has saved my milk many times from curious dogs/cats, and dust/dirt/poop/hay that is perpetually floating in barn air.

3. **Strain it-** It's never fun to take a big gulp of fresh milk and end up with a hair in your mouth, so always strain your fresh milk ASAP. Floaties WILL happen, no matter how hard to try to prevent it while you are milking...

4. **Cool it-** It's important to get your fresh milk as cold as you can as fast as possible (*40 degrees F is ideal*). Some folks put a small, reusable ice pack in the bottom of their bucket to cool it as it comes out of the cow or goat. I personally haven't found that to be necessary, but I do bring my bucket inside right away and get it strained, and into the fridge.

Rapid cooling of the milk prevents the bacteria count from rising, and it keeps the milk tasting better, longer. However, keep in mind that once raw milk has naturally soured, it's still good and can be used for lots of other stuff.

5. **Store it-** Only store your milk in glass containers- never plastic. I get my one-gallon jars from Azure Standard (*or save big pickle jars- just be sure to wash them thoroughly.*)

Place your jars of raw milk towards the back of the refrigerator (*avoid the door, since that area tends to be warmer.*) If you have home dairy animals, you'll find that your raw milk jars fill up your fridge rather quickly. So, you might want to keep your eyes open for small, dorm-size fridges at yard sales.

6. **Sanitize it-** Cleaning your home dairy equipment thoroughly is a MUST. After I pour my milk into the jars, I immediately run cool (not hot) water over my bucket and filter to wash off the milk solids which can cause build-up if allowed to dry.

I don't use bleach to wash my equipment (*have I mentioned that I hate bleach?*), but I do like to run everything through my dishwasher which sanitizes the equipment. If you don't have a dishwasher, you may hand wash it with a bit of soap and very hot water.

Allow each piece of equipment to air-dry. Don't dry anything off with a towel, as this can transfer any bacteria that might be hanging out on your dish towel onto your milking equipment. Make sure everything is completely dry before replacing lids.