

Is there any safe way to eat cookie dough? Your baking-safety questions answered

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Taking away one of the small joys of baking, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is once again reminding families not to eat raw cookie dough. Its warning to "Say No to Raw Dough" comes as families prepare to bake in kitchens during the holiday season. The agency warns

that eating or tasting unbaked products, such as dough or batter, can lead to illness—and kids can get sick from even handling raw dough.

"Cooking and baking together around the holidays can be a great way to spend time together," CDC spokeswoman Brittany Behm told the Tribune. "We want people to keep in mind that eating raw cookie [dough](#), cake mix or bread can make you and your kid sick." Kids younger than 5 are most at risk, she said.

Raw [eggs](#), which can contain salmonella, are a culprit, as is raw flour, which hasn't been treated to kill bacteria like E. coli, according to the CDC.

We talked to Dr. Robert Citronberg, director of infectious diseases at Chicago's Advocate Lutheran General Hospital, about how to gauge your risk and safe ways to indulge. This interview has been edited for space and clarity.

Q: People should not be eating cookie dough, but they definitely still do. Can you explain why they should avoid it?

A: I remember as a kid my mom would tell me not to eat raw cookie dough. It's most definitely not a new concept, and it's also nothing specific to cookie dough itself. You shouldn't eat raw flour, and you shouldn't eat [raw eggs](#), in general, for any purposes. When you put those together, you're putting together two raw ingredients that theoretically, if those are contaminated, you can get sick from.

There is no specific outbreak associated with this, not like we had with [romaine lettuce](#) in November or like we had with McDonald's salads a couple months ago. I think this is more of a public service announcement, or reminder for good practices. More people are going to be using these ingredients around this time of year.

Q: What is the danger within both eggs and flour?

A: They can harbor bacteria. Those bacteria are killed completely with cooking, so if you don't cook them, they're still contaminated. If the ingredients have already been pasteurized, then they are considered to be safe. So pasteurized eggs would be considered safe.

It's really no different than when you're using any raw ingredient. It's the exact same argument not to eat raw or undercooked chicken or not to put cooked chicken back on the raw plate because it can get contaminated.

Q: What about flour? That's something that might not be on people's radar as problematic, as much as raw eggs.

A: The issue with eggs is more with salmonella, primarily. The issue with flour has more to do with E. coli. There have been outbreaks of E. coli infections from contaminated raw flour.

Q: What are the odds of someone getting sick after eating raw cookie dough?

A: The risk is super small. The risk of an individual getting sick from eating raw flour or raw eggs is very low. I think [public health officials](#) look at the cumulative effect and don't want anybody to get sick. While the individual risk of getting sick is extremely low in the absence of a known outbreak, for the population, it's probably a good idea to avoid potential risks.

I would describe it as small but measurable, in that if everybody in the country today ate raw cookie dough, probably a few people would get sick. You're not talking about outbreaks of a thousand people.

Q: So should kids not handle flour at all—no projects like bread baking

or homemade papier mache? Is there any safe way to do these holiday traditions?

A: I think as long as you're not eating (papier mache). As far as baking projects, the two things that you can do that are sure to eradicate risk are, one, cooking it and, two, washing your hands. Even if you touch contaminated flour or raw eggs, wash your hands with soap and water; you've removed it, and there's no additional risk.

Q: Is the risk of E. coli worse than it used to be, or does it just seem we are hearing about it more?

A: I think it's both. Obviously news spreads a lot faster now than it did before, but there's no doubt that the number, in general, of food-borne outbreaks seems to have increased in recent years. I think that food-borne outbreaks are more common than they once were, and we hear about them more.

Q: Chicago now has a raw cookie dough bar. The company uses pasteurized eggs and heat-treated flour. So is that OK to eat?

A: If the ingredients are treated or pasteurized, they should be safe to eat. Also, cookie dough ice cream is considered safe to eat because the ingredients are [flour](#) and/or eggs that are pasteurized.

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