



# Fact Sheet

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For Immediate Release

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## Illegal Production of “Bathtub” Cheese

- The California Department of Food and Agriculture warns consumers about the health risks of consuming soft cheese, such as Queso Fresco, produced by unlicensed manufacturers and sold through underground operations. Licensed, safe and wholesome Queso Fresco is sold in retail stores, authenticated by the labeling requirements noted on page two.
- This cheese is known as “Bathtub” cheese because it is frequently produced in unsanitary environments
- Illegally manufactured cheese poses a health threat to California consumers because unlicensed manufacturers often use raw, unpasteurized milk that may encourage the growth of harmful bacteria that can cause severe illness and, in some cases, death.
- Listeria and Salmonella are the most common bacteria found in cheese made by unlicensed manufacturers and can cause:
  - Severe illness, especially among infants, the elderly and those with impaired immune systems
  - Miscarriage
  - Illness to unborn babies
  - Infection, which may spread to the blood stream unless antibiotic treatment is administered promptly
  - Diarrhea, fever, and abdominal cramps occurring 12 to 72 hours after infection and usually lasting 4 to 7 days
- Bacteria in contaminated cheese cannot be detected by sight, taste or smell
- *Queso Fresco*, the most common type of “Bathtub” cheese, is a soft, white cheese that has a mild, slightly salty flavor. It is frequently cheese sold by unlicensed producers at swap meets, flea markets, small neighborhood markets and door-to-door, as well.

- To identify cheese produced by a licensed manufacturer, consumers should purchase cheese from the refrigerated case at retail stores. Pre-packaged cheese is required to contain the following on the label: legal name of product, name and address of distributor or processor, quantity of contents, an ingredient statement, nutrition facts, and specify if the cheese is manufactured from pasteurized dairy ingredients or aged over 60 days. Cheese that is sliced and wrapped in the presence of the consumer is exempt from these requirements, but the retailer must identify the cheese by name.
- California is the nation's number one dairy state, producing more than 1.5 billion pounds of cheese per year.
- In California, it is a criminal offense to manufacture and sell cheese from an unlicensed facility. Each conviction carries a sentence of up to one year in jail and a maximum fine of \$10,000.

### **Cheese Food Safety Guidelines**

- Keep cheese refrigerated between 33°F and 41°F
- Store cheese in plastic wrap after each use
- Wash hands with soap and hot water before handling food items
- Keep utensils and work surfaces clean to prevent cross-contamination
- Use different utensils to cut cheese, meat, poultry and seafood items

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