

Eggs: Safety in Numbers

Salmonella Isn't the Threat It Used to Be, Scientists Say

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With the spinach and peanut butter food-safety scares barely behind us, worries about possible contamination in eggs, especially in the Easter and Passover season, would seem natural. After all, eggs have been on the risk radar screen for decades.

Good news: We don't have as much cause for concern as we used to. Statistics show gains in egg safety. In 2002, the last year for which numbers are available, 10 percent of reported Salmonella enteritidis outbreaks in the United States were related to eggs, compared with a spike of 80 percent in 2001, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. These days, according to the CDC, salmonella outbreaks are more likely to be caused by other foods: juices, salsa, meat, sprouts, fruits and salads.

Egg producers take credit for making things better. They are more diligent about sealing henhouses against pests and wild birds; they require people who enter to wear shoe coverings, hairnets and other special clothing; and they make sure feed and water are salmonella-free, says Hilary Shallo Thesmar, director of the industry-supported Egg Safety Center in Washington.

To foster greater progress, the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2004 created the Egg Safety and Quality Research Unit in the Agricultural Research Service. Soon afterward, the unit completed a study showing that "eggs have good quality and safety way beyond the date on the carton," says Deana Jones, an ARS researcher.

A project is underway to examine the use of cold water to wash freshly laid eggs instead of the warm water now used. ARS researcher Richard Gast explains: When an egg forms in the reproductive tract of an infected hen, a few salmonella cells take up residence in the egg white, where they normally do not multiply to dangerous levels. But the yolk contains rich nutrients that would stimulate high-speed bacterial growth. Immediate chilling of a warm, freshly laid egg prevents the bacteria from invading the yolk.

But chilling does not kill the bacteria. Very high temperatures, as in cooking, do the trick.

That's why experts advise against eating raw or undercooked eggs -- as in soft-boiled, sunny-side-up or loosely scrambled eggs, or as an ingredient in foods such as Caesar salad, cookie dough and eggnog. One recommendation for frying sunny-side-up eggs is to flip them so both sides get cooked. Another is to add a little liquid and cover the pan for a few minutes.

The Egg Safety Center and the USDA differ somewhat on egg doneness, though, with the center saying that except for pregnant women, infants, the elderly and those with chronic diseases, it's okay to eat yolks that are not cooked completely solid. The USDA takes a more conservative approach, advocating that yolk and white reach at least 160 degrees.

No known studies have looked at whether eggs from small farmers, or organic or free-range eggs, are safer than other commercially produced ones. But fans of runny yolks who want extra protection might want to consider buying pasteurized eggs, which are produced exclusively by National Pasteurized Eggs Inc. and sold under the name Davidson's Safest Choice. They can be eaten raw or at any state of doneness.

Introduced in 2001 and originally sold largely to food-service outlets and restaurants, the eggs have gained widespread retail distribution. In the Washington area, Safeway and Harris Teeter sell them. The price can be double that of regular eggs. Safeway offers large pasteurized eggs at \$3.99 a dozen, compared with \$1.99 for its store brand of regular large

eggs. At Harris Teeter, large Davidson eggs are \$3.39 a dozen and the store brand is \$1.49.

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