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## Making Sense of the Salmonella in Eggs Scare

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FDA officials announced a few weeks ago that feed used by the egg producers identified in the salmonella outbreak, Hillendale Farms and Wright County Egg, was the source of the infection. So far, 2,403 cases have been reported to the CDC, more than twice the usual number for that same time period. It is heartening to hear that the systems in place by the government were able to make this determination, but what does it mean for consumers who are trying to figure out how to feed their families?

How can we make the right choices to select safe, healthy produce?

In the USDA's Food Pyramid, eggs fall into the Meats, Poultry, and Fish section (the purple slice). Studies have shown that moderate consumption of eggs can be a good source of 13 essential nutrients, including iron, protein and those needed for eye, heart, and brain health (like Omega-3s). For 2010, the estimated per capita consumption of eggs is projected to be about 247.1 per person. That means that every man, woman, and child in the United States eats almost one egg a day for most of the year. Eggs, whether eaten in shelled form or incorporated into other foods, are a component of the modern American diet, so this contamination has a wide-ranging impact.

According to figures from their website, United Egg Producers represents 192 large egg-producing companies which own 95% of the laying hens in the United States, a huge concentration of production. By comparison, in 1987, there were about 2,500 egg-producing companies. The top five states that produce eggs are Iowa, Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and California, in that order; this represents 50% of all laying hens. The two firms involved in the recall, which affected 46 brands of shell eggs, are both located in Iowa.

While none of the potentially-infected brands of eggs were supposed to have been distributed to New York City, where I live, that didn't stop me, or the woman who was also standing next to me staring at the egg display in the grocery store the other day, from wondering what to buy, what it was safe to eat, how to figure out making the right selection from all the available brands in the refrigerator case. So, I did a little searching around.

My starting point was to look at large eggs sold by the dozen. Large eggs are the standard size to use in almost all baking recipes, so they are the ones I usually buy. Then, I went with a few other parameters. Do you choose brown eggs or white? Nutritionally, there's actually no difference between the two colors. The color of the egg has to do with the type of hen from which it comes.

At the farmers market, I asked several of the vendors how old their eggs were. They replied that the eggs were gathered from one to three days prior to sale and advised that the eggs would keep about two to three weeks. With these basic facts and half dozen large brown eggs from upstate New York in hand, I then visited several grocery stores to see what I could find there. "Best-before" dates were as early as right before Labor Day to as late as mid-October. From unverified postings I found on the internet, it seems that the information on how old those eggs might be once they arrive in the store varies from seven to thirty days.

Prices ranged widely as well. The least expensive ones that I found were \$1.49 / dozen. The most expensive ones were sold at \$6.00 per half-dozen for pasture-raised eggs sold in the farmers market.

Sep 16

**KathyBlake**

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[That farmer keeps a very small flock and actually does not specialize in egg production.] Other eggs in that same market sell for between \$4.00 to \$8.00 / dozen, which is not out of line with some of the pricing that I saw at several of the grocery stores.

While it might seem indulgent to spend that much on one food per week, to me, it is a sign as to the interest in care of the hens and quality of the product that eggs have generated to create such a market. The real bottom line, however, is that knowing what options are available for the kind of eggs you would like to feed to your family and what is best for their health and well-being are also important factors to consider. It isn't just the brand names or the prices, but who is behind producing what is going on our tables and into our bodies.

#### Egg Buying Terminology Cheatsheet:

*Cage-free* – hens are not kept in a system of cages, like battery hens; they may, however, be confined to barns or sheds as this does not necessarily mean free-range

*Cruelty-free* – a more complicated definition requiring the consumer to really know how the hens were raised; see the Humane Society for more information (<http://www.humanesociety.org>)

*Free-range* – hens are given access to the outdoors; it does not specify the amount of time that they should be given so the application of this definition varies widely

*Hormone-free / Antibiotic-free* – hens are not given feed containing hormones or antibiotics, which can then be passed along to humans through the eating process

*Omega-3 (DHA / EPA as subset)* – naturally-present nutrients in eggs necessary for brain and heart health; flaxseed may be fed to hens to increase presence of Omega 3, which is found in the egg yolks; DHA / EPA comes from fish oils, so hens' diets are also modified to increase this in eggs

*Organic* – hens are given feed that is free of fertilizers, pesticides, antibiotics, hormones, and animal by-products; in organic-certified farms, the birds are also allowed to roam freely

*Pasture-raised* – hens are given total access to eating and foraging outdoors and are provided mobile units for sleeping; some evidence shows that these have better nutrient levels due to the variety of plants and bugs the birds eat

*Pasteurized* – a process of applying concentrated heat to shell eggs or egg products to destroy harmful organisms; some say that this also changes the taste and quality of the eggs, but these are recommended for use in dishes such as sauces that use under-cooked eggs (e.g., mayonnaise, béarnaise, hollandaise, Caesar salad dressing)

*Vegetarian / Vegan feed* – hens not given feed with animal by-products (does not also necessarily mean it is organic)

#### Basic Egg Safety Tips:

Don't eat raw eggs; refrain from licking the beaters when making a cake or eating raw cookie dough  
Refrigerate eggs to < or = 450 F / < or = 70 C and don't leave them sitting out for hours once they've been refrigerated  
Cook them until the white and yolk are firm (in baked products and casseroles, the internal temperature should get to 1600 F / 720 C); avoid eating runny or undercooked eggs  
Wash thoroughly in hot, soapy water anything that has or may have come into contact with raw eggs (hands, countertops, dishes, utensils, etc.)

#### Other Resources:

American Egg Board (<http://www.aeb.org>) CDC (<http://www.cdc.gov>) Egg Safety Center (<http://www.eggsafety.org>) FDA (<http://www.fda.gov>) United Egg Producers (<http://www.unitedegg.org>) USDA (<http://www.usda.gov>)



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