EGG SAFETY

Safe food handling is a continued important topic in today's news. In the springtime, attention turns to eggs safety as plans are made for festive occasions that include colored eggs, egg hunts, and decorative egg centerpieces that look good enough to eat! Even the traditional "sunny side up" method of cooking breakfast eggs comes under close scrutiny as up-dated cooking guidelines suggest egg yolks be firmly cooked.

The issue of food safety cannot take a holiday but consumers armed with information, can safely prepare and enjoy eggs in many fun filled ways this spring. While eggs are a valuable source of nutrients and can be an important component of a healthy diet, the nutrients in eggs are also a good growth medium for bacteria. This risk of a foodborne illness transmitted by egg consumption can be reduced or eliminated by proper cooking and chilling of egg products. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) supported by the egg industry has established and published safe handling information that can be found on the eggs you purchase. The label states: "Safe Handling instructions: To prevent illness from bacteria keep eggs refrigerated, cook eggs until yolks are firm and cook foods containing eggs thoroughly. These guidelines are designed to keep Salmonella, the bacteria found most commonly in eggs from becoming an uninvited guest at the dinner table. If eggs are kept refrigerated at 40 degrees or below, bacteria are unable to grow. When cooked properly, until no runny white or yolk is left, the bacteria that may be present will be destroyed. It is wise to follow the guidelines followed by restaurant and other food service establishments when cooking eggs. These guidelines state that "in general, shell eggs that are cooked for customer's order should be cooked to 145 degrees F or above for 15 seconds." Casseroles made at home should measure 160 degrees F on a food thermometer. Following these simple guidelines helps ensure the safety of eggs being served, when eating at home as well as when dining out.

Safety guidelines practiced at home can ensure that all vulnerable members of the family are protected from potential foodborne illness. The very young, the elderly, convalescing, and chronically ill or pregnant people are often most susceptible to foodborne illness.

Contrary to popular belief, Salmonella can be found on the inside of the egg as well as the shell. As the egg ages, carbon dioxide in the shell is replace by pockets of air which aide in transmission of bacteria to the yolk. Best advice says don't eat or serve raw or undercooked egg white or yolk, or products containing them. Purchase clean, chilled eggs with uncracked shells.

At this time of year eggs are handled more than usual and each handling provides the opportunity for bacteria to come into contact with the egg. It is very important, therefore that both children and adults wash hands with soap and warm water before handling eggs at every step. This includes cooking, cooling, dyeing and hiding. The following are some safety tips on how to keep the family safe while having fun with eggs.

When dyeing eggs, do not use eggs that have cracked during the cooking process. You may eat them without dyeing or use them in an egg dish. Use food coloring or a food grade dye to color eggs. Make sure all hard-boiled eggs are stored in the refrigerator and consumed within one week. If you will not dye the eggs right after cooking, refrigerate them until you are ready to dye them, then refrigerate again until ready for the egg hunt. If you plan to use decorated eggs as a centerpiece or other decoration where they will be out of refrigeration for more than two hours, do not consume those eggs and discard them when the festivities are over.

When preparing hard-boiled eggs to color, cook them perfectly. Here's how: place eggs in a single layer. Add tap water to cover one inch above the eggs. Cover and bring the water to a boil. Turn off the heat and
remove the pan to a cool burner. Let stand 15-17 minutes for large eggs and adjust the time up/down by three minutes for other sizes. (It's a good idea to crack, peel, and cut one egg to make sure the timing is correct) Chill under cold water or in ice water. Dry and refrigerate, or decorate immediately.

The best tip for hiding eggs is to use plastic ones or do not plan to eat the ones that have been hidden (or cracked, stepped on, sampled by insects, left in the sunshine or found by the family pet)! If they have escaped these vulnerabilities, remember that two hours is the outdoor limit for real eggs, after which they must be refrigerated or eaten! If they pass this limit, find all of them and toss them out to make sure the family pet doesn't continue the game after the egg hunt is over.

The old favorite egg toss game is still the safest spring time activity: when in doubt...toss it out!