

## Easter a good time to remember egg safety

by Bend\_Weekly\_News\_Sources

Consumers should consider eggs a potentially hazardous food. One of the foods most closely associated with the Easter holiday season is also one of the foods that can easily lead to illness, if not handled or prepared properly. But by following a few common-sense rules, consumers can safely enjoy what marketers call "the incredible edible egg." "Eggs are a perishable food that can sometimes carry the bacteria *Salmonella enteritidis*," says Ron McKay, administrator of the Oregon Department of Agriculture's Food Safety Division. "People need to treat raw eggs the same way they treat raw meat, raw milk, raw shellfish or any other uncooked, hazardous food. These foods need to be kept cold and heated thoroughly." Cooking potentially hazardous foods is the key. Heat will destroy the organism that would make someone sick. Still, there are many recipes that call for raw eggs as an ingredient. Consumers should be aware that those foods can also cause illness. "Any raw meat product, milk product, or egg product is potentially hazardous and needs to be handled with care," says McKay. It boils down to purchasing eggs wisely, storing them properly, and preparing them carefully. The first step is at the grocery store. "Go ahead and open the carton and make sure you are purchasing eggs with no cracked shells," says McKay. "Make sure they are refrigerated before you buy them. You may want to put eggs and other perishable foods in your grocery basket last so they don't spend much time out of refrigeration." After purchase, it's time to find an appropriately cool spot for the eggs. "Get them in a refrigerator that is 40 degrees or colder," says McKay. "Remember that the inside part of the door is the warmest part of the refrigerator. Put the perishable foods in the colder part of the refrigerator. Leave the eggs in the carton. They will last longer that way." It is best to consume eggs within five weeks if they have remained raw. If you cook the egg, it's best to consume it within a week. That becomes even more topical this time of year when hard cooked Easter eggs are plentiful. If the brightly colored egg ends up as part of a child's backyard hunt, it may be best to avoid eating it. Once those eggs have been outside or handled and hidden, they could become damaged. Remember, they will be out of refrigeration. The best thing to do is discard them. If they have been out of the refrigerator for more than two hours, there should be no doubt- throw it out. Of course, there is a critical step between purchase and storage, and the consumption of eggs. That is careful preparation. "You should cook eggs slowly over a gentle heat," says McKay. "For hard cooked eggs, you need to cook them until they are no longer runny, but firm. Egg products that are cooked need to reach the safe temperature of 160 degrees Fahrenheit. If you are baking a meringue for Easter Sunday dinner, you need to cook that at 350 degrees for at least 15 minutes. Be careful with things like French toast. Make sure those get cooked well too. It is probably better to overcook than undercook." While *Salmonella* is the main culprit of egg safety, the high amount of protein and moisture associated with eggs leaves them vulnerable to other food pathogens. Cross contaminating an egg mixture can be hazardous simply because the egg can support rapid growth of other bacteria. For those who insist on eating raw cookie dough and Caesar salad, there are pasteurized egg products that can be purchased at the grocery store. Hollandaise sauce, homemade mayonnaise, and eggnog are other products with recipes that may call for uncooked eggs. The safe thing to do is use the pasteurized product. The local eggs on sale this week are likely to be about as fresh as they can be. Eggs will almost always arrive at the grocery store less than a week from the day they were produced. During heavy consumption periods such as Easter, those eggs are more likely to arrive within a day or two. Oregon is a significant producer of eggs, which is ranked #12 in production value among all Oregon agricultural commodities. The \$51 million industry ensures a fresh product as more than 823 million eggs were produced in Oregon in 2005- the most recent year in which statistics are available. The state's 2.8 million egg-laying hens are concentrated in a handful of major commercial producers, the largest of which owns more than a million laying hens. Freshness does not equate with food safety. Just as it is with consumers, safe handling practices are important to the producer. That's why the modern day egg is rarely, if ever, touched by human hand before it is offered for sale. Most laying hens are housed exclusively indoors in facilities that are virtually 100% automated. Feeding systems and heat-ventilation systems are computer controlled to maintain a constantly balanced environment for the birds. Eggs are collected via conveyor. All the other procedures in production- from candling to grading to packaging- are done by an automated system. Again, eggs produced today in these larger operations remain virtually untouched until they reach the consumer. "All eggs, whether they come from small processors or large ones, are required to be washed and sanitized as well as graded and

sized before they get to the marketplace," says McKay. "But the most important thing you can do is to handle them as if they are a potentially hazardous food. That way you will be safe no matter what kind of egg you may have in your hand."Eggs can be part of a healthy diet during Easter as well as the rest of the year. Only when they are mishandled are they likely to become a problem.For more information, contact Ron McKay at (503) 986-4720.

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