Egg safety for consumers

This fact sheet is to inform consumers about the risks associated with contaminated eggs and to provide advice in relation to purchasing, storing, handling and cooking eggs safely to minimise the risks.

Eggs are a highly nutritious food. However, cracked or dirty eggs have been associated with many food poisoning outbreaks and should not be used. In particular, young children, the elderly and anyone who is in poor health should avoid eating foods containing raw or partially cooked eggs such as:

- sauces and spreads such as mayonnaise, aioli and hollandaise
- desserts made without a cooking step, such as cheesecake, tiramisu and mousse
- lightly cooked foods such as custard, meringue, cold soufflé, fried ice cream
- some ice cream and gelato made on the premises
- drinks such as eggnog.

In Queensland, eggs sold by retail and for catering purposes must not be cracked or dirty, because:

- if an egg shell is cracked (including fine hairline cracks), harmful bacteria can easily enter and grow inside the egg
- eggs that are not clean are a food safety risk. Dirty eggs are a perfect environment for bacteria and as the eggshell is porous, bacteria can move through the shell and into the egg itself
- eggs that are cracked and/or dirty have a much higher chance of carrying bacteria and, in turn, significantly increase the risks of food poisoning.

Contaminated eggs may not necessarily look or smell ‘off’.

Purchasing eggs

When purchasing eggs:

- check that the eggs are clean and free from visible dirt or feathers and that the shells are not broken or cracked. This includes eggs that are sold at road-side stalls or given to you by a neighbour or friend
- check that the name and address of the egg producer is on the carton or packaging as well as the production date or best before date.
- check that the eggs are individually stamped with the producer’s unique identification.

It is illegal for food businesses to sell or supply cracked or dirty eggs for retail or for catering purposes. If a food retailer or caterer sells or offers for sale cracked or dirty eggs, consumers should report this offence to their local Public Health Unit, contact details are located on page 2 of this fact sheet.

Storing eggs

It is important to use eggs before the recommended date shown on the outside of the carton or packaging.

It is recommended that eggs are stored in the refrigerator in their carton or other egg container. This extends the life of the egg, minimises the risk of harmful bacteria growing and protects the eggs from damage.
Handling eggs

Always ensure you thoroughly wash your hands before and after handling eggs particularly if they are cracked or dirty. Avoid unnecessary handling of eggs.

Do not try to clean dirty eggs by washing the eggs. Egg shells become more porous when wet, which makes it easier for any bacteria from dirt, feathers or faeces that may be on the shell, to get inside the egg. The only safe way to deal with dirty or cracked eggs is to throw them out.

Contact between the shell and the contents of the egg should be minimised when breaking eggs. Keep raw eggs away from other food to avoid cross contamination.

Surfaces which have been in contact with raw eggs, as well as the utensils used for their preparation, should be thoroughly washed and dried before being used again.

Cooking eggs

Consumers should avoid eating raw eggs and uncooked or partially cooked foods made with raw eggs. Harmful bacteria are killed by cooking, but illness can occur if eggs are added to a food that will not be cooked or are only partially cooked such as mayonnaise, hollandaise, béarnaise and aioli sauces, ice cream, eggnog, cheesecake, mousse and meringue, particularly if they are home-made.

These foods should be consumed immediately after preparation. Any leftovers should be refrigerated and consumed within 24 hours. Do not store food containing raw or lightly cooked egg at room temperature.

Eggs should be cooked until the yolk and white are firm. Scrambled and fried eggs need to be cooked in small batches until they are firm (not runny) throughout. Boiled eggs, depending on their initial size and temperature, may require a minimum boiling period of 7-9 minutes to ensure that the yolk becomes firm.

Serve hot dishes containing eggs straight away. If the meal is not going to be eaten straight away, cool it quickly in the fridge. When reheating cooked food containing eggs, ensure that the food is reheated thoroughly to piping hot.

Keeping your own chickens

If you keep your own chickens:

- collect the eggs twice a day, especially in warmer weather to reduce the risk of bacteria growing
- throw away any eggs that are dirty, cracked or broken and any eggs which may have lain in a nest for an extended period of time
- store eggs in clean containers in the refrigerator
- always use the oldest eggs first.

For further information

The Queensland Department of Health has a variety of fact sheets with detailed information on food safety. These can be accessed at www.health.qld.gov.au/foodsafety.

If you have any further questions or wish to report a retailer selling cracked and dirty eggs, please contact the Public Health Unit for the area where you are located. Contact details for Public Health Units can be found at www.health.qld.gov.au/cho.