

Are Some Eggs Safer Than Others?

Egg recall has people asking whether other types of eggs, such as free range or pasteurized, are a better choice.

By Jennifer Nelson

WebMD Feature

Reviewed by [Laura J. Martin, MD](#)

On the heels of the latest egg recall, salmonella concerns are at an all-time high. More than 500 million eggs from Iowa's Hillandale Farms and Wright County Egg have been recalled in the nationwide investigation of a salmonella outbreak. The outbreak has sickened more than 1,000 people.

Consumers have been there, done that. Since 2006, they've faced other deadly outbreaks from tainted spinach, peppers, peanuts, pistachios, tomatoes, and salami. This week, Wal-Mart pulled potentially contaminated deli meats from its cases.

Salmonella enteritidis is a common bacterium found inside perfectly normal-looking eggs. If eggs are eaten raw or undercooked, it can cause illness including abdominal cramps, diarrhea, fever, and vomiting within 12-72 hours.

Most people recover without treatment, but infants, the elderly, and those with weak immune systems are at risk for serious illness.

**Eggs & Salmonella:
Get the Facts**

When it comes to eggs, tougher rules are finally on the books for the biggest producers. In July, The FDA set in place mandatory inspection of hen houses of more than 50,000 birds. They're required to test both houses and eggs for salmonella. If it's found, they must report it and pull eggs from production. Smaller farms have until 2012 to comply.

"Most producers follow voluntary and mandatory guidelines to make sure that what they're providing on the farm goes into a safe quality product for the consumer," says Krista Eberle, director of Food Safety Programs at the American Egg Board.

But just how can you tell what you're buying, when you're shopping for eggs? What do terms like cage-free, free-range, organic, and others mean?

Cage-Free Eggs

Cage-free eggs are eggs from birds that are not raised in cages, but in floor systems usually in an open barn. The hens have bedding material such as pine shavings on the floor, and they are allowed perches and nest boxes to lay their eggs. However, they may still be at close quarters with many other hens -- just not in cages. That depends on the farm.

Free-Range Eggs

Free-range eggs are laid from hens that have the opportunity to go outside. Smaller farms may keep birds outside under a canopy area. They may travel in and out of a barn at free will or spend some portion of their day roaming outdoors.

Organic Eggs

Organic eggs are laid from hens that may be kept in any kind of caging system, but generally are cage free. They eat an organic feed and don't receive vaccines or antibiotics.

In order to qualify for USDA organic certification, the grains used for the hens' diets must be produced on land that has been free from the use of toxic and persistent chemical pesticides and fertilizers for at least three years.

Genetically engineered crops are not permitted, and hens must be maintained without hormones, antibiotics, and other intrusive drugs.

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Vegetarian Eggs

Vegetarian eggs are laid from hens that are only fed a vegetarian diet -- free from meat or fish by-products. Hens are kept in cages or indoors and do not peck any grubs or worms.

Pasteurized Eggs

Pasteurized eggs are eggs in their shell that have been put through a pasteurization process where they are heated to 140 degrees Fahrenheit for three and a half minutes. Eggs are not required to be pasteurized.

Pasteurization completely kills bacteria without cooking the egg. The process can also be done for packaged egg whites used in cooking.

Eating pasteurized eggs is recommended for young children, the elderly, and people with weakened immune systems so they can reduce the risk of contracting a salmonella infection.

Which Egg Is Safest?

“Those terms (organic, free-range, and cage free) have nothing to do with contamination. That does not assure eggs will be salmonella-free,” says Mike Doyle, PhD, director of the University of Georgia’s Center for Food Safety. However, it may ensure the hen has a better life.

To protect yourself further:

- Check eggs before buying to make sure there are no cracked or leaking eggs, which could transfer any bacteria that are present.
- Immediately refrigerate eggs to 45 degrees Fahrenheit or below so if bacteria are present, they won’t multiply.
- Cook eggs thoroughly so the white and yolk are firm, which kills salmonella.
- Wash hands, utensils, and preparation surfaces thoroughly with hot, soapy water when handling and preparing eggs.
- If you’re collecting eggs from your own backyard flock, wash eggs in hot soapy water before refrigerating.
- Use pasteurized eggs for recipes that call for raw egg in foods like salad dressing, hollandaise sauce, or spaghetti carbonara.
- Young children, the elderly, and anyone with a compromised immune system should also eat pasteurized eggs.
- When buying fresh eggs from a local farmer’s market, ask whether they’ve been washed and refrigerated within 36 hours of being collected, which cuts the risk salmonella.