

Egg Safety Update

A new report by Government food safety advisors has concluded that British Lion eggs can safely be eaten runny, even by pregnant women, babies and elderly people

Background

The current advice that vulnerable groups should avoid raw or lightly cooked eggs was set in the late 1980s, following the salmonella in eggs crisis. Since then, the British egg industry has effectively eliminated salmonella in eggs through the British Lion scheme.

In 2014 the Food Standards Agency (FSA) asked the Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Food (ACMSF) to review the current food safety risk from eggs. The year-long ACMSF investigation, the first since 2001, assessed the current level of microbiological risk to consumers (including vulnerable groups) from raw or lightly cooked shell eggs and their products and assessed how the risk with respect to Salmonella has changed since its last report.

What did the new report find?

The ACMSF report, published in January 2016, concluded that British Lion eggs can safely be eaten runny, even by pregnant women, babies and elderly people. It recommended that the FSA should now consider amending its long-standing advice – that vulnerable groups should avoid raw or lightly cooked eggs – for eggs produced under the British Lion scheme or a demonstrably-equivalent comprehensive scheme.

The report acknowledged the ‘significant efforts’ undertaken by the UK egg industry to reduce Salmonella Enteritidis in laying flocks, which it says has made a ‘remarkable impact’ in reducing the levels of Salmonella Enteritidis infections in humans.

It concluded: ‘There has been a major reduction in the microbiological risk from Salmonella in UK hen shell eggs since the 2001 ACMSF report. This is especially true for those eggs produced under the Lion Code, which comprises a suite of measures including: vaccination, a cool chain from farm to retail outlets, enhanced testing for Salmonella, improved farm hygiene, better rodent control, independent auditing, date stamping on the eggs and traceability.’

‘The very low risk level means that eggs produced under the Lion Code, or produced under demonstrably equivalent comprehensive schemes, can be served raw or lightly cooked to all groups in society, including those that are more vulnerable to infection, in both domestic and commercial settings, including care homes and hospitals.’

Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Food, January 2016.



Other recommendations in the ACMSF's report

- Measures to improve the traceability of egg supplies, especially those within the catering sector, should be considered.
- Up-to-date information relating to catering practices, such as pooling and storage of eggs, should be obtained. Eggs from any source should be protected from cross-contamination by any potential food poisoning bacteria.
- It supported FSA advice that if caterers do not purchase eggs produced under the Lion Code or a scheme equivalent to it, they should use pasteurised egg for any food which is likely to be served uncooked, or lightly cooked.
- Two studies in the catering industry (2002, 2006) identified poor practice in relation to egg storage and handling, including pooling of eggs, in catering. FSA should review the uptake/impact of the most recent FSA advice in this area (2014).
- Robust, evidence based methods for the validation of the performance of heat-processing treatments are probably required because current methods may overestimate the microbial load reduction achieved, with industrial procedures for heat treatment of egg products.



Why are Lion Code eggs highlighted?

The British Egg Industry Council's Lion Code of Practice, introduced in 1998, has effectively eliminated salmonella from British Lion eggs through a comprehensive suite of measures.

The wide-ranging Lion Code of Practice covers the entire production chain and incorporates food safety controls above and beyond those outlined in current UK and EU legislation, including:

- All Lion hens and eggs guaranteed British
- Hens vaccinated against Salmonella Enteritidis and Salmonella Typhimurium
- Registration and a unique 'passport' system, ensuring complete traceability of hens, eggs and feed
- Increased hygiene controls and salmonella testing of all flocks in the integrated egg production chain, in excess of the National Control Programme, including turnaround swabbing of breeding, pullet rearing and laying flocks; and packing centre hygiene swabbing
- Regular egg testing (not included in National Control Programme)
- Stringent feed controls, including production of feed to Universal Feed Assurance Scheme (UFAS) standards
- Cool chain starting at the farm
- Lion Quality eggs stamped on farm with the farm code and production method
- Best-before date and Lion logo printed on the shell of Lion Quality eggs as well as on the egg box
- Regular independent auditing, including unannounced audits, of all producers and packers in the Lion scheme, in accordance with the ISO 17065 standard



What happens next?

The published report is now subject to a consultation period ending on 1 May 2016. Once completed, the FSA will consider the report and any other comments before deciding how to update its advice to consumers and caterers.

Retailer and foodservice businesses should ensure that they specify British Lion eggs to ensure that their customers benefit from the forthcoming change in advice over the coming months.

