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SPECIAL INSERT:
Be Yard Smart —
a Guide to
Environmental
Gardening



Food Safety Q & A

Is This Food Still Safe to Eat?

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September is National Food Safety Education MonthSM.

A typical food safety question is "Is this food still safe to eat?" Here are answers to questions about four frequently encountered situations. But, always remember the standard food safety advice is "When in doubt, throw it out." Follow that advice.

Q: Is it safe to refreeze raw meat and poultry that has thawed?

A: The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) advises "Meat and poultry defrosted in the refrigerator may be refrozen before or after cooking. If thawed by other methods, cook before refreezing."

Meat/poultry that is refrozen might suffer some quality loss as moisture may be lost during thawing.

Safety will depend on whether the raw product was handled properly before it was frozen, refrozen shortly after it was thawed, cooked to a safe temperature when it is eaten and handled safely if there are any leftovers.

The standard food safety advice is "When in doubt, throw it out."

Q: Is there any way I can tell from the egg carton how old the eggs are? Are there some guidelines for how long eggs are safe to eat?

A: According to USDA "Many eggs reach stores only a few days after the hen lays them. Egg cartons with the USDA grade shield on them, indicating they came from a USDA-inspected plant, must display the 'pack date' (the day the eggs were washed, graded and placed in the carton). The number is a three-digit code that represents the consecutive day of the year (the 'Julian Date')

starting with Jan. 1 as 001 and ending with Dec. 31 as 365."

To access a "Julian Date Converter" to calculate the day/month pack date from the Julian Date, go to: www.ams.usda.gov/poultry/consumer/InterpretPackDate.htm

Though not required, egg cartons also may contain a "sell by" date beyond which they should not be sold. In USDA-inspected plants (indicated by the USDA shield on the package), this date can't exceed 30 days beyond the pack date. Plants not under USDA inspection are governed by laws of their states.

Always purchase eggs before their "sell by" date.

According to the American Egg Board "Refrigerated raw shell eggs will keep without significant quality loss for about four to five weeks beyond the pack date or about three weeks after you bring them home."

If the eggs were right at their sell-by date when purchased, you might have only about a week of storage time before there was quality loss. Plan to use your eggs accordingly. Eggs are a source of complete protein and are nutrient-dense, containing only 75 calories while providing several essential nutrients. Two carotenoids, lutein and zeaxanthin, are both abundant in egg yolks. Recent research has shown an egg a day will *not* increase the risk of heart disease or stroke for healthy individuals.

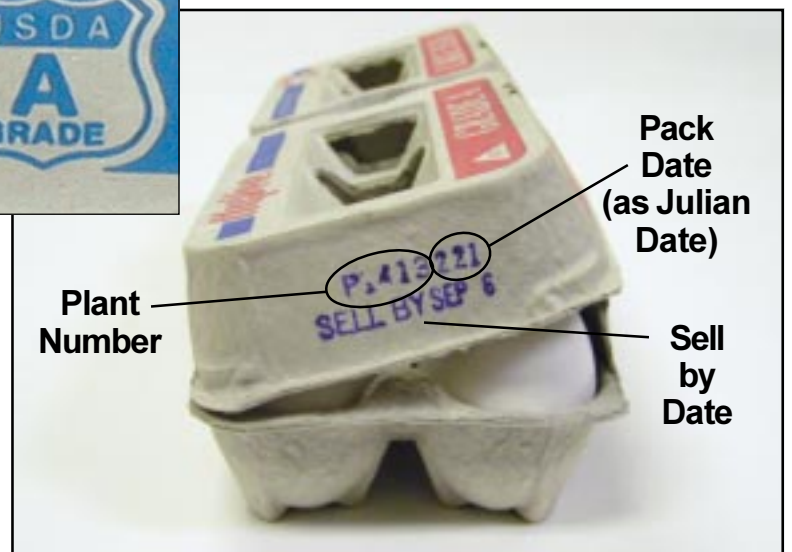
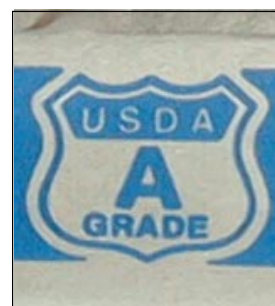
"If by chance you have an egg you have removed from the carton and no longer know when it was packed or purchased, it may be difficult to determine its freshness," according to Marsha Greenblum, MS, RD, Associate Director, Education Outreach, Nutrition and Food Safety, Egg Nutrition Center. "The test of freshness that involves seeing if an egg floats in a glass of (salt)-water is not a reliable test. In fact, this test has no relationship to the freshness of shell eggs. While eggs do take in air as they age, the size of the air cell varies

from egg to egg when they are laid. Therefore, a freshly laid egg and an older egg might react very similarly."

When unsure about the safety of your eggs, as with all foods, when in doubt, toss them out.

cooking. If a food is heavily freezer burned, it may be desirable to discard it for quality reasons.

Q: If I reheat food that was forgotten on the counter overnight or was left out all day, will it be safe to eat?



Egg cartons with the USDA grade shield indicate which plant they came from, when the eggs were packed and sell by date.

To help preserve the quality of your eggs, store them in their carton in the coldest part of the refrigerator, not open on the door. Open storage on the door increases the chance of cracks with repeated opening and closing of the door. Temperature fluctuations may decrease storage time. Run your refrigerator at 40° F or lower.

Proper cooking as well as proper storage is important for egg safety. Cook eggs thoroughly so both yolks and whites are firm, not runny. Do not eat raw or undercooked eggs.

Q: Is it safe to eat food that has "freezer burn?"

A: "Freezer burn," a condition in which the surface of food appears light colored and dried out, occurs when moisture on the surface evaporates. Proper cooling, air removal, moisture-vapor-resistant packaging, a tight seal and an appropriate length of storage help prevent freezer burn. Keep your freezer at 0° F or lower.

While a food with freezer burn is safe to eat, the quality is lower. You can cut away freezer burn spots either before or after

A: TWO hours is the maximum time perishable foods should be at room temperature. This *includes* the time they're on the table during your meal. Just *one* bacterium, doubling every 20 minutes, can grow to over 2,097,152 bacteria in seven hours!

Perishable foods include:
• meat, poultry, seafood and tofu
• dairy products
• cooked pasta, rice and vegetables
• fresh, peeled and/or cut fruits and vegetables.

Reheating food may not make it safe. If food is left out too long, some bacteria, such as staphylococcus aureus (staph), can form a heat-resistant toxin that cooking can't destroy.

One of the most common sources of staph bacteria is the human body. Even healthy people carry staph — according to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's "Bad Bug Book," staph bacteria are present in the nasal passages and throats and on the hair and skin of 50 percent or more of healthy individuals. Staph bacteria is found in facial blemishes, cuts and lesions.

Most likely, the only way you'll know if a food contained staph bacteria is when someone gets sick.

A special thanks to Mary Torell, Public Information Officer, Nebraska Department of Agriculture Poultry and Egg Division for her help with the section on eggs.

Web Resources

For more help with food safety questions, go to UNL Lancaster County Extension's "Food Safety for Home Cooking" Web site at lancaster.unl.edu/food/foodsafety.htm



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