

Specialty Eggs



Due to higher production costs, specialty eggs are usually more expensive than generic shell eggs.

In an effort to meet consumer demand, egg producers have begun marketing vegetarian, organic, cage-free, free-range, fertile, in-shell pasteurized, and nutrient-enhanced specialty eggs. These eggs offer alternatives to consumers with special needs and preferences. Due to higher production costs, specialty eggs are usually more expensive than generic shell eggs.

Since the nutrient content of an egg can be changed only by altering the hen's feed, specialty varieties such as cage-free and organic eggs have the same nutritional value as generic varieties. Nutritionally-enhanced varieties such as omega-3 enriched eggs provide higher levels of certain nutrients because these nutrients are enhanced in the hens' feed. Nutrient content cannot be altered by changing environmental conditions unless this also modifies what kind of feed is available.

Organic Eggs



In October 2002, the National Organic Standard Board set national guidelines that must be met by producers wishing to market "organic" eggs. (Specific organic standards may be found at www.ams.usda.gov/nop.) Organic eggs are produced by hens given feed grown without most conventional pesticides, fungicides, herbicides, or commercial fertilizers. The use of growth hormones is also prohibited by the new organic standards. Growth hormones are not used in commercial egg production in the United States. Consumers can be confident that all eggs are hormone-free, whether or not they are labeled as such. National organic standards also prohibit the use of antibiotics. While antibiotics are sometimes used to treat sick birds, this is not a routine industry practice. Hens typically stop laying eggs when they become ill.

Vegetarian Eggs

Vegetarian eggs are produced by hens whose feed is free of animal by-products.

Aracauna Eggs

Aracauna eggs are from Aracauna chickens, native to South America. Nutritionally, these bluish-green eggs are not much different from traditional white and brown eggs you might find at the local grocery store. Actually, even though many consumers think these eggs are lower in cholesterol, eggs from this breed have a higher cholesterol content.

Pasteurized Shell Eggs

Pasteurized shell eggs are a good choice for people who want to use raw eggs in recipes that do not require further cooking, such as homemade ice-cream or Caesar salad dressing. These eggs have been heat treated to kill potential salmonella bacteria found inside. (The risk of purchasing an egg contaminated with salmonella bacteria is one in 20,000 eggs.) However, due to the heat processing, these eggs may have slightly lower levels of heat-sensitive vitamins.

Thoroughly cooking generic shell eggs until whites are firm and yolks are beginning to thicken will also destroy any potential salmonella bacteria in the egg.

Fertile Eggs

Some cultures consider fertile eggs a delicacy. But aside from coming from a hen that has possibly mated with a rooster, there is no nutritional difference between fertile eggs and generic eggs.



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Housing Environment

Most hens are housed in large laying facilities that use cage systems. This provides hens with optimal temperature, humidity, feed, water, laying space, and security. Even though this housing method may seem to limit a hen's freedom, it is actually designed for the welfare of the birds as well as for production efficiency. In the hen house, the birds are more readily protected from the elements, from disease, and from both natural and unnatural predators (i.e. automobiles). Housing hens also makes it possible to control their diet, which results in better-fed hens that produce high-quality eggs. Egg producers are also phasing in larger cages or allowing more space to house the birds. For consumers who object to housing hens in cages, alternatives such as free-range and cage-free eggs are available.

Free-range eggs come from hens that are either raised outdoors or have access to the outdoors. Due to seasonal conditions, however, few hens are actually raised outdoors and access to outdoors can vary greatly between free-range production facilities.

Cage-free eggs come from hens living in indoor floor facilities. These hens do not necessarily have access to the outdoors. They usually live on the floor of a barn or poultry house. Mortality rates are higher in hens living in free-range and cage-free environments since the birds tend to peck at and injure each other. The nutrient content of eggs from free-range and cage-free hens is the same as for those produced by hens housed in cages.

Egg producers have also begun implementing new **animal welfare standards** that ensure the care and handling of egg-laying hens. The United Egg Producers (UEP) has adopted standards developed by an independent scientific advisory committee made up of scientists from government agencies, academia, and the American Humane Association. These guidelines assure that eggs under the United Egg Producers Certified program come from hens living in humane conditions with attention to living environment, health care, and treatment. (Egg producers participating in the UEP Certified program are audited annually by a third party organization. For more information, see www.uepcertified.com.)

Nutrient-Enhanced Eggs

Commercially raised hens are fed specially formulated feed that consists of corn, cottonseed, soybean meal, and/or sorghum—depending on which grain is most affordable. Sometimes animal by-products are also added to increase protein content. The feed is carefully balanced by a poultry nutrition specialist to combine the right amounts of protein, fat, carbohydrates, vitamins, and minerals. By adding certain ingredients to the feed, some producers are enhancing the nutrient content of their eggs.

Omega-3

By including flax, marine algae, or fish oils in the feed, omega-3 fatty acid content in egg yolks can be dramatically increased. These omega-3 fatty acid enriched eggs are a good choice for people who want to increase their intake of omega-3 fatty acids, but do not regularly eat fish. The demand for omega-3 eggs is increasing as we continue to learn about the health benefits associated with this fatty

acid. Higher vitamin E content is an additional benefit of omega-3 enriched eggs.



Lutein

Eggs from birds raised on a diet that includes marigold extract are high in lutein, a nutrient that has been shown to reduce the risk of macular degeneration (the leading cause of blindness in people 65 and older). According to one study, lutein in eggs is better absorbed by the body than is lutein from other sources.

Where to Buy Specialty Eggs

Most large grocery stores carry specialty eggs. They can usually be found in the dairy section next to the generic shell eggs. For more information about specialty eggs, check our website (www.enc-online.org/links.htm). Specialty egg companies can provide you with more detailed information about their products.