

DON'T GIVE KIDS GASTRO FOR CHRISTMAS

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Victorian parents should take extra care over summer when preparing meals for small children that include raw eggs, the Department of Human Services has warned.

Victoria's Chief Health Officer, Dr John Carnie, said that while gastroenteritis could affect people of all ages it posed a particularly high risk to children aged under 5-years.

"From a public health perspective, we'd love to see children eat more eggs and less junk food but parents need to apply some basic food hygiene rules, especially as we head into summer," Dr Carnie said.

"Many consumers know they have to keep prawns and oysters chilled, cook chicken thoroughly, prevent meat juices contaminating other items in the fridge, and refrigerate leftovers quickly.

"However, 76 per cent of Victorians are unaware that food and drink containing raw or undercooked eggs can also be a risk, especially for young children. Uncooked food prepared at home containing raw egg such as mayonnaise, milkshakes, tiramisu and chocolate mousse fall into this category.

"Food and drinks containing raw and undercooked eggs have been associated with *Salmonella* outbreaks in Victoria. We recommend cooking your eggs until they are hot all the way through, which kills any bacteria that may be present, guaranteeing your eggs are safe to eat."

Dr Carnie said the elderly, people with lowered immunity and pregnant women were also more vulnerable to gastroenteritis.

"According to research conducted in October, 22 per cent of Victorians buy or prepare food for a child under the age of five – and 27 per cent are unaware that the symptoms of food-borne illnesses were significantly worse in young children," he said.

Dr Carnie said the cautionary advice for parents of young children was part of a broader campaign to educate consumers about the potential risk of food poisoning from poor storage, handling or preparation of eggs.

"We are running an education campaign to remind Victorians eggs need the same care as chicken, meat, seafood and dairy foods," he said.

"Check that your eggs are clean and have no visible cracks before you buy them. Refrigerate your eggs at home, preferably in the original carton so you know the best-before date. And if you find a dirty or cracked egg, throw it out – washing the egg actually makes it easier for bacteria to penetrate the porous shell.

Recent research into the egg buying, storage and cooking habits of 1,000 Victorians revealed that:

- 51 per cent of Victorians would wash a dirty egg then use it, unaware that this increases the risk of transferring bacteria from the surface of the egg into the egg itself.
- 13 per cent do not store their eggs in the refrigerator, even though egg cartons direct them to do so;
- 28 per cent store eggs loose in the door of the fridge, discarding the best-before date on the carton.

The education campaign, developed in cooperation with the Victorian Farmers Federation Egg Group, is promoting safe egg handling, storage and cooking practices. Information leaflets will be inserted in egg cartons over the summer, encouraging consumers to care for their eggs and enjoy the benefits of a healthy fast food packed with vitamins and minerals.

The message of the campaign is simple: "Eggs need TLC: Buy clean, keep cool, cook well."

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