

News

Runny eggs safe for pregnant women

By Sarah Knapton SCIENCE EDITOR

PREGNANT women and the elderly can enjoy the simple pleasure of dipping toast soldiers into a runny yolk for the first time in 30 years, after the Food Standards Agency today relaxed its rules on uncooked eggs.

Since the Eighties salmonella scandal, vulnerable groups have been advised to hard-boil their eggs for fear of food poisoning.

But yesterday, the FSA confirmed that eggs marked with the British Lion are safe to be soft-boiled – or even eaten raw – following a year-long risk assessment by The Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of

Food. The turnaround follows two decades of vaccination programmes and improved hygiene in farms which has virtually wiped out salmonella in British eggs.

“This is a real success story for the UK egg industry,” said Andrew Joret, chairman of the British Egg Industry Council, which runs the British Lion scheme.

“We know that the previous advice has deterred many women from eating eggs when pregnant, and from giving them to their babies, as well as denying older people the pleasure and nutritional benefits of a ‘dippy egg’ and home-made mousses and mayonnaise.

“The advice is particularly good

news for these groups and will also enable care homes to put many traditional egg dishes back on their menus.”

Britons eat around 12 billion eggs each year, the majority of which are produced in the UK.

However egg sales slumped by half in 1988 after Edwina Currie, then a junior health minister, claimed most were infected with salmonella, a comment which led to her resignation.

In an effort to win back public confidence, and improve quality, the British Lion Code of Practice was introduced in 1998. It requires hens to be vaccinated, increased hygiene controls, salmonella testing, best-before dates on the egg shell as well as on the box, and

independent auditing. 90 per cent of British eggs now hold the lion mark. Heather Hancock, chairman of the food standards agency, said: “It’s good news that now even vulnerable groups can safely eat UK eggs without needing to hard-boil them, so long as they bear the British Lion mark.

“The major reduction in the risk of salmonella in Lion eggs is testament to the work carried out by egg producers.”

Eggs are contain many key nutrients including high quality protein, vitamin D, selenium, iodine, choline and omega-3 fatty acids.

Dr Juliet Gray, a registered nutritionist, said: “The new advice is very

welcome news. These nutrients are particularly important for many vulnerable groups, including pregnant women, babies and elderly people and several of them are not found in many other foods.”

Prof Paul Wigley, professor of avian infection and immunity at the University of Liverpool, said: “The FSA decision is a reflection on the success of UK egg producers in all but eliminating salmonella from the UK flock.

“Since the introduction of vaccination in 1998 the levels of salmonella have declined. The poultry industry is frequently criticised but we should recognise a success story for our farmers.”