
New Hampshire
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Markets & Food*

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Eggs are Back

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The price of fresh eggs has risen significantly over the last few months. Several factors have coincided to push prices up. Relatively high feed grain prices, increased egg consumption and slightly reduced flock sizes nationally, all have contributed to the price run-up. Tight supplies and increased demand at the same time, usually results in price increases for farm products – the classic supply and demand control that governs agricultural commodity pricing. Prices will likely drop again when egg farms increase production to catch up with demand.

In the meantime, eggs continue to be a great food value, providing high quality protein, vitamins and minerals, and convenience, all in one small package. The high-protein low-carbohydrate diet trend has contributed to increased egg consumption, as has new information indicating that cholesterol in eggs may not be the health concern it was once thought to be.

Egg quality is governed by federal and state regulations. The US Department of Agriculture provides grading and packing requirements for egg farms and packing plants, assuring quality eggs leaving the farm. In New Hampshire, the NH Department of Agriculture, Markets & Food provides egg inspection services, in cooperation with USDA, for the state's egg farms. At retail, FDA and state health inspectors assure that eggs are refrigerated.

Most often, eggs in New Hampshire are sold as Grade A, which stipulates that the eggs be fresh, clean and free of shell and interior defects. Freshness is largely dependent on the time that has elapsed since the egg was laid. Maintaining temperatures at 40 degrees F or less, and high humidity, helps maintain freshness. Eggs that are kept this way will maintain their quality for several weeks at least. Eggs that are produced at USDA inspected plants generally are labeled with an "expiration" or "sell by," date as a guide to purchasers, although this is not a requirement of the state egg regulations. As eggs age, the egg white or albumen becomes thinner and clearer, yolk strength also lessens. While eggs may no longer be considered 'fresh' after several weeks, they will still be safe to consume, provided properly cooked, for as long as several months. If using eggs that have been stored for some time, its wise to break them out individually into a separate bowl first. Any egg with an off-color or odor should be discarded.

In addition to freshness, the regulations for eggs require eggs to be sized and labeled in accordance with established size classes. There are five size classes: small (18 ounces), medium (21 ounces), large (24 ounces), extra large (27 ounces) and jumbo (30 ounces). The weights are the minimum net weight for a dozen, exclusive of the carton, but it does include the weight of the shell itself. An interesting egg fact is that the size, although influenced by the breed of the chicken and its nutrition, is primarily a result of the hen's age. Jumbo eggs are mostly from older birds, while small eggs, come mostly from young birds. Young laying hens are referred to a 'pullets' and hence the small eggs they produce as 'pullet eggs.'

No discussion of New England eggs is complete without mentioning the white egg, brown egg debate. Yes, brown eggs are generally the predominate type raised in this region. Tradition dictates that New Englanders,

Connecticut excepted, prefer brown eggs, while most of the rest of the nation favors white eggs. What's the difference? Nutritionally there is no difference, brown eggshells have pigments that give them a light tan to medium brown color and may also be somewhat thicker than white-shelled eggs. Simply, brown eggs come from strains of brown or red-feathered hens, while most white eggs come from white-feathered birds. Brown egg laying breeds of hens tend to be larger in size than their white egg laying counterparts, thus they eat somewhat more grain to produce the same number of eggs – this is why brown eggs costs slightly more than white eggs.

For more information on this topic and others, contact the Division of Regulatory Services, NH Dept. of Agriculture, and Markets & Food at tel. (603) 271-3685, registrations@agr.nh.gov or visit the website at www.agriculture.nh.gov.

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