

The chicken or the raw egg? A cautionary tale

Recent salmonella outbreaks in a Canberra restaurant and several functions in Brisbane caused by mayonnaise provide some sobering food safety lessons for your cafe and restaurant clients who are continuing to plate up dishes containing raw or semi-cooked eggs.

By Geoff Russell, Claims Team Leader



The use of raw eggs in sauces, shakes and desserts by Australian cafes and restaurants has led to a record number of salmonella food poisoning outbreaks in recent years and provides some important lessons for the industry.

While the risk of salmonella infection from eating undercooked chicken is widely understood, many food premises have limited knowledge about the risks associated with using raw eggs in homemade sauces (e.g. mayonnaise, aioli etc.), shakes, custards and mousses or serving minimally cooked eggs.

A recent food poisoning case in Canberra traced back to the mayonnaise served in a restaurant helps to illustrate the serious impact such an incident can have on both the community and the business.

According to newspaper reports, up to 140 people were infected with the salmonella bacteria on **the Mother's Day weekend 2013 after eating potato salad at the newly opened Copa Brazilian** Churrasco restaurant in Canberra. The Calvary and Canberra hospitals had to activate their emergency response plans because of the large number of people presenting with severe food poisoning symptoms including diarrhoea, abdominal pain and fever; 15 people were hospitalised.

The restaurant voluntarily closed while ACT Health investigated the cause of the outbreak. Up to 30 people from ACT Health worked on the case at any one time – inspecting the restaurant, questioning the owners and staff, and collating data about the infection.

At the conclusion of the investigation, which traced the infected eggs back to a Victorian producer, **ACT Chief Health Officer Dr Paul Kelly told the Canberra Times: "Really, it was just the raw eggs. I really wish people would just stop using them."**

Six months later, 220 people fell ill after attending several functions and eating salads dressed with home-made mayonnaise supplied by a reputable Brisbane catering company with an incident-free, 25-year track record. That salmonella outbreak allegedly contributed to the death of one elderly woman and caused seven people to be hospitalised. Investigations are continuing.

Thousands of foodborne outbreaks have been reported in Australia since 2001, with salmonella identified as the causative agent in about a third of cases. A strain of salmonella bacteria traced back to eggs (and foods containing raw or minimally cooked eggs) was found to be the culprit in 90 per cent of cases.

According to Martyn Kirk, a senior lecturer in epidemiology at the Australian National University, eggs have become the most common cause of food-related disease outbreaks partly due to poor food safety practices and partly due to inadequate farm regulations.

While state and federal laws require eggs to be washed properly before **sale, this doesn't always happen. And while salmonella doesn't grow on egg shells, it can survive and contaminate other foods including the material inside the egg.**

An outbreak of food poisoning attributed to a café/restaurant can cause serious reputational **damage and result in significant loss of earnings. And that's just for starters.**

The business can also be subject to substantial regulatory fines, find itself included on the name and shame registers of local authorities administering the Food Act, be sued under civil liability **laws and subject to public liability claims. That's not to mention the likelihood of increased insurance premiums.**

One Lumley café client recently became the target of a class action following a salmonella outbreak linked to mayonnaise in its sandwiches. After hearing about the outbreak, a lawyer placed an article in the local newspaper to recruit affected people for a class action that was eventually settled out of court.

The legal costs alone of defending this kind of claim can be enough to put a small café out of business – **why it's important that food establishments also have Management Liability cover** included in their business insurance program.

So what can food establishments do to reduce their exposures?

The safest option is not to serve raw eggs to customers. That's the course of action Copa Brazilian Churrasco took. On June 5, the restaurant posted on its [Facebook page](#): "All eggs have been removed from our menu since we've reopened."

Failing that, it pays to know where your eggs are coming from – i.e. use only reputable suppliers – or source pasteurised egg products for use in dressings/desserts. Store eggs/egg products in the fridge; use them when they are still fresh.

The [Survey of Egg Based Sauces and Salmonella](#) report published by the Western Australian Department of Health advises food businesses to take the same precautions when storing and handling eggs as for other primary products (e.g. raw chicken, meat, seafood and salad ingredients).

The report recommends businesses either use pasteurised egg products or implement procedures that ensure microbial safety, including:

- Washing hands before and after handling eggs
- Storing eggs at 5°C
- Using only clean, uncracked eggs
- Keeping eggs separate from ready-to-eat foods
- Minimising contact between egg contents and the external shell
- Storing eggs in the original packaging to ensure you know the use-by date
- Informing customers if using raw/lightly cooked eggs, so they can make an informed decision
- Disposing of any foods that include raw egg within 24 hours
- Ensuring sauces/dressings containing raw eggs have a pH of 4.8 or less (NB: the acid in vinegar or lemon inhibits – but does not kill – the growth of bacteria).

While companies in the hospitality trade can recover from food poisoning incidents, the reputational scars will continue to linger on in cyberspace.

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