Get out your Easter bonnets and baskets; the Easter bunny is coming soon. Lots of eggs will be decorated and hidden for the children to find, so to avoid the possibility of food borne illness, follow these guidelines to make your eggs safe for eating at Easter egg hunts.

**Purchasing and Storing:**
When purchasing eggs, choose only grade A or AA eggs that have clean, un-cracked shells and that have been stored in a refrigerated case. Once home, promptly refrigerate the eggs in their original carton on the inside shelf of a refrigerator that is maintaining a temperature of 40°F or below. Keep the eggs refrigerated until it is time to decorate them.

**Preparing For Decoration:**
When ready to decorate, keep in mind that an egg shell is porous enough to allow bacterial penetration. To prevent contamination wash hands thoroughly with warm, running water and soap before and after handling the eggs. Try not to handle eggs excessively whether cooking, cooling, dyeing or hiding. For perfectly hardboiled Easter eggs, the American Egg Board recommends the following method: Place eggs in a saucepan large enough to hold them in a single layer. Fill the saucepan with enough tap water to cover the eggs by at least 1 inch. Add one tablespoon of vinegar to the water to promote better dye coverage after cooking. Cover the pan; bring the water to a boil, then immediately remove the pan from the burner to prevent further boiling. Allow the eggs to stand covered in the hot water for 15 minutes, then promptly place the eggs in an ice water bath to stop cooking. Let the eggs remain in the ice water until completely cooled. Store the eggs in a clean container in the refrigerator until ready to decorate.

If you plan to decorate hollowed out egg shells there are a few steps you should take before blowing the contents out of the shell. You must first wash the eggs in warm water. After the eggs have been washed soak them in a solution of one teaspoon chlorine bleach to one quart lukewarm water for 20 seconds. Allow the eggs to air dry completely. After blowing the contents out of the egg shells, either immediately cook or discard them. All utensils and surfaces that come in contact with raw eggs should be washed in hot, soapy water.

**Decorating Eggs:**
Most egg producers apply a light coat of mineral oil as a protective barrier against contamination. Cooking eggs removes this coat of oil and leaves the egg more susceptible to contamination; therefore proper handling is especially important after cooking. Eggs whose shells crack during cooking should not be used for decorating or hiding. If you plan to eat your Easter eggs, be sure to use food coloring or food-grade dyes to color the eggs. After the eggs have been decorated, return them to the refrigerator until they are to be hidden.

**Hiding Eggs:**
Carefully choose hiding places for Easter eggs to prevent them from coming in contact with dirt, pets, wild animals, birds, reptiles, insects or lawn chemicals. Return eggs to refrigeration immediately after the egg hunt. Do not eat eggs that remain out of refrigeration for more than two hours during the egg hunt (one hour if it is 90°F or hotter). Finally, hard-cooked eggs should be kept refrigerated and used within one week. When enjoying egg decorating and egg hunts this Easter season remember to follow these recommended safe handling tips to keep the holiday safe and enjoyable.
Have a question? Contact the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension office at (229)734-3015, weekdays 8 a.m. to noon or 1 to 5 p.m.

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