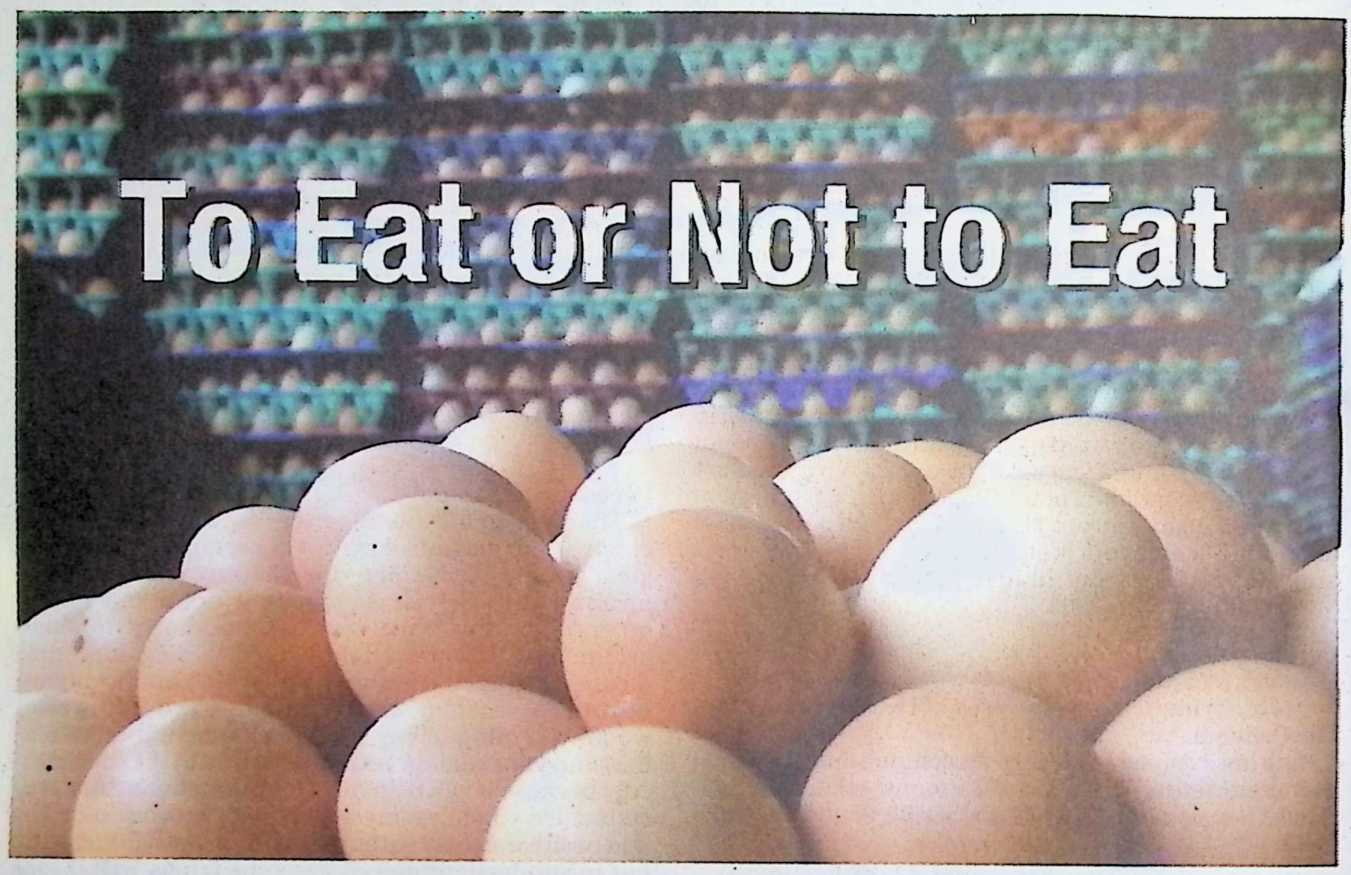


To Eat or Not to Eat

With the news of farms culling their sick chickens because they are suspected of being infected by the bird flu, consumers have reacted promptly boycotting chickens and eggs. The biggest sufferers are the children whose diets include these items and for which there are no good substitutes. Poor people and the middle class too, are in a fix trying to find alternative protein sources, as eggs have always been the cheapest one as prices of fish and meat have continued to soar.

A Daily Star report quotes a nutritionist from the Institute of Public Health Nutrition (IPHN) as expressing concern over a possible severe protein deficiency among people who have crossed out chicken and eggs from their diets. Both these items are high in protein. Another nutritionist has said in the report that the body absorbs 100 percent of the protein in eggs which also contains Vitamin A, D, cholesterol, fat and amino acids, all of which are important for children's growth.

So what should people do: eat eggs or not. So far doctors and researchers have said that as long as the chicken meat and eggs are cooked at a temperature of 70 degrees Celsius, it is safe to eat them. The World Health Organisation says thorough cooking will kill any virus, including the deadly H5N1 strain of avian flu. Eggs from sick birds could also contain the virus. So, the World Health Organisation advises people from affected areas not to eat raw, or undercooked eggs.

It is actually the way the live chickens and raw eggs are handled that is important. Observing good hygiene in the farms when handling chicken and eggs, as well as in the markets, washing the outer area of the eggs with detergent water or sodium bicarbonate (saline water apparently helps to) are important precautions. But the public is far from being convinced and continue to shun chicken and eggs like the plague. This is because the information given regarding this is not clear enough or readily available. The government has to give people the right information regarding this issue with the help of experts. Until they get the full story about this frightening virus, eggs and chicken will continue to be looked at with suspicion.