



What part does public perception play in the development of a risk-benefit communication strategy about food?

A range of research projects has helped us understand about the ways in which consumers think about the risks and benefits associated with different foods, as well as different food production technologies. From here, it is possible to develop risk–benefit communication strategies.

What are the research findings?

The research has shown that consumers:

- Feel more vulnerable to risks that they perceive as being imposed on them or are uncontrollable, or if it is unclear who might be affected or how. Some food processing technologies, eg genetic modification, seem to fall into this category.
- Have an “optimistic bias” about some risks, where they think they are at lower risk than other, similar people.
- May not be making healthy dietary choices or taking self-protective measures against microbiological risks because of this optimistic bias, which means, they think other people are more at risk than they are.
- May experience both risks and benefits from some foods. For example, fish contains healthy omega three acids, but may also be contaminated by methyl mercury, which may cause health problems for pregnant women or people who are immune-compromised.

What are the policy implications?

It is important to target effective communication to those who are at risk or will benefit from dietary choices or self-protective behaviours:

- All risk-benefit communication needs to take account of risk-benefit perceptions if information is to be seen as relevant to the target group.
- Rapid communication is needed as soon as a problem is detected eg a rural business would need to act quickly to tell consumers if a microbiological contamination incident could affect their products.
- Hiding an “uncertainty” will promote public distrust if this is later made public - communicate uncertainty and what is being done to reduce it.
- Multiple media channels, including “traditional” ones such as leaflets or radio should be employed. Not everyone who is potentially affected by a food hazard has access to the internet or uses social media.

Further information:

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