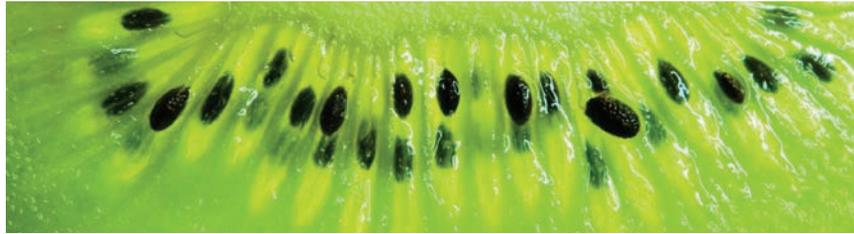


Communicating food-related health risks



7 Communicating food-related health risks

7.1 Risk communication

Risk communication involves the interactive exchange of information about risk between risk assessors and risk managers, and among FSANZ, news media, interested groups and the general public.

Risk communication, which is an essential part of the risk analysis process, begins at the earliest stages of a potential food-related health and safety issue. This is to ensure that appropriate strategies can be developed to communicate information internally and externally, including to consumers.

In the Codex risk analysis framework, risk communication is considered in both risk assessment and risk management (see Figure 1 in Section 4.2). The interactive and ongoing exchange of information and opinions quickly between the risk assessors and risk managers involved in risk analysis is vital for successful outcomes. Communication with external stakeholders, including the broader community, is also essential to inform FSANZ's decision-making processes and to ensure transparency, trust and a high level of confidence in the food regulatory system.

Communication with stakeholders is a two-way process. FSANZ prepares communication strategies to give stakeholders the information they need to better understand the health and safety risks associated with foods and managing those risks. Stakeholders are also given opportunities to contribute to FSANZ's consideration of issues. Externally-focused risk communication has as much to do with building productive relationships with stakeholder groups as with disseminating information. Therefore, appropriate methods of exchanging information with a broad range of interested and affected people need to be established early in the process.

Everyone connected to the risk analysis process is responsible in some way for risk communication. While specialist communicators may be responsible for preparing media releases, a communication strategy or publishing material on the website or on social media, the project manager has overall responsibility for the communication.



Much of the externally-focused risk communication involves a strategy which seeks to:

- identify the target audience
- design messages for those audiences
- use the most appropriate communication vehicles for interacting with those audiences.

Risk communication should aim to provide clear, accurate, relevant and easy to understand information to audiences at appropriate points in the risk analysis process.

It should give an honest appraisal of identified health risks, the uncertainties associated with that appraisal, and the steps being undertaken to address the identified risks.

7.2 Communication strategies

Communication strategies for engaging external stakeholders vary according to the complexity of the issue, the degree of public interest and how long the risk analysis and formal consultation processes will take. For example, amending a pesticide MRL may involve a strategy comprising only public notifications in newspapers and on the FSANZ website. Developing a new food standard dealing with all aspects of a primary industry sector would take several years to complete and would require public consultations, detailed consideration of the target audiences, messages and communication vehicles. Another challenge of a large project would be to keep stakeholders interested and aware of the status of the project during periods of inactivity.

7.2.1 Risk perception

Communication strategies are developed according to four levels of risk, based on scientific evidence (as determined by FSANZ) and perceived risk (as seen by the community), as shown in Table 2. Some consumers may hold a perception that the use of certain food components (e.g. food additives), and technologies (e.g. irradiation), may contribute to an increase in health risk. In developing appropriate communication strategies, it is important to note that consumers may hold these particular beliefs regardless of the available scientific evidence. Consumers' perception of risk can be influenced by many factors, including their level of knowledge and understanding of the issue, as well as their level of acceptance of the potential perceived benefits to public health and/or safety. Perceptions about food risks can change slowly over time as new information becomes available and familiarity with the issue grows. For this reason, consumer research that investigates and provides contemporary information on the links between food and health outcomes play an important component in risk communication, as it can provide reassurance to consumers about the health and safety of food.



7.2.2 General matters

Individual communication strategies are not mutually exclusive and may be used in combination. The strategies indicate the main direction and level of communication activity required for a particular health risk. They are 'preferred' strategies, which does not preclude adopting other strategies if the need arises.

Table 2. Communication strategies

Level	Risk combinations	Communication strategy
1	LOW risk – LOW perceived risk	PASSIVE
2	LOW risk – HIGH perceived risk	RESPONSIVE
3	HIGH risk – LOW perceived risk	EDUCATIVE
4	HIGH risk – HIGH perceived risk	PROACTIVE

It is necessary to have a good understanding of how a risk is perceived by the public in order to identify which communication strategy should be applied to a particular food issue.

This understanding may be developed by monitoring media and online debate, or through research designed to measure and assess public risk perceptions. Such studies may have been initiated to answer specific risk assessment or risk management questions, but can also collect data useful in constructing risk communication messages and strategies. In addition to new research, existing studies on the factors influencing consumer perceptions of risk will form an important evidence base.

Communication vehicles that can be employed in each of the strategies vary. They may include media liaison, web publishing, interactive web forums, fact sheets²⁵, reports, meetings, conferences, advice line, displays, launches, email bulletins and advertising.

Passive communication strategies

Passive communication strategies involve notifying and alerting interested and affected individuals and groups to the food issue. These strategies are used generally when the scientific evidence supports a low level of risk and where there is a low perceived risk by the community e.g. the proposed use of processing aids.

25 <http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/consumer/safety/faqsafety/Pages/default.aspx>



Responsive communication strategies

Responsive communication strategies are used where the community, or a section of the community, perceives a much greater risk in a food issue than the scientific evidence would indicate. In these cases, the degree of communication activity will be increased and will include media releases; proactive media liaison; providing regular and updated web material; and using social media.

Educative communication strategies

Educative communication strategies are particularly useful when the scientific evidence shows a high risk for the food issue, of which the community is unaware. Education campaigns are developed in an attempt to effect behaviour changes in the target groups e.g. increasing knowledge and awareness in pregnant women about mercury in fish.

Proactive communication strategies

Proactive communication strategies are used when the scientific evidence and the community awareness of the food issue indicates a high risk. In these situations, media and stakeholder interaction is initiated early, and is put in place when all parties agree there is significant public health and safety risk e.g. BSE.

7.2.3 Applications and proposals

Stakeholder views are sought for all applications and proposals to change the Code. This occurs through a formal call for submissions process in one or more rounds of public consultation. All submissions are made publicly available and taken into account during FSANZ's consideration of applications and proposals.

Application and proposal reports are also publicly available except when information is considered confidential commercial information under the provisions of the FSANZ Act²⁶.



26 <http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/foodstandards/changingthecode/>