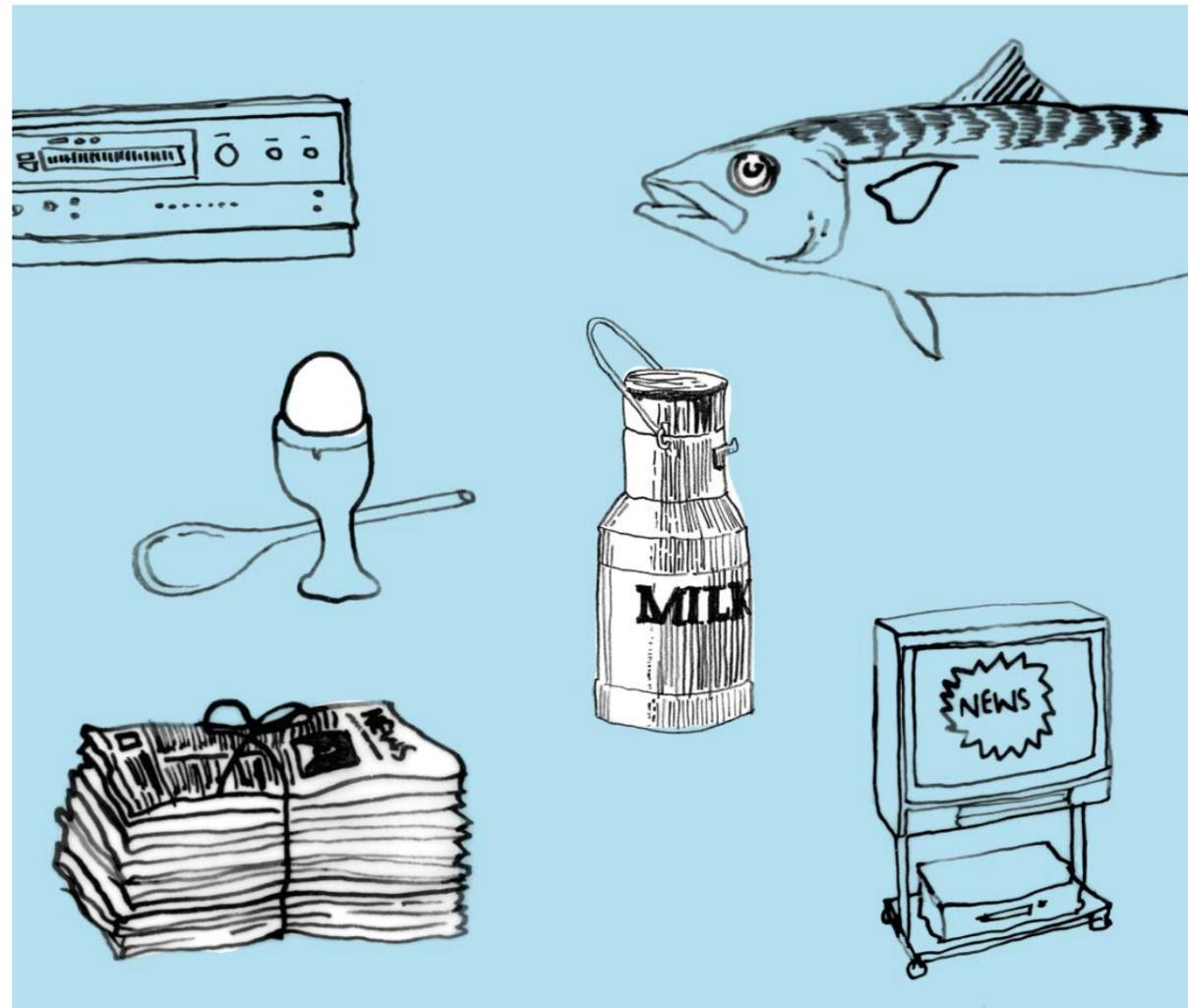


# Food Risk Communication

## Research Summary



# **Novel Strategies for Food Safety Risk Communication**

## *Research Summary*



Report prepared by:

Mary McCarthy<sup>a</sup>, Mary Brennan<sup>b</sup>, Martine de Boer<sup>a</sup>, Christopher Ritson<sup>b</sup>, Alan Kelly<sup>a</sup>, and Nicola Thompson<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University College Cork

<sup>b</sup> University of Newcastle upon Tyne

Report funded by:

**safefood,**

Food safety Promotion Board,

Block B, Lower Abbey St,

Dublin 1

# 1. Introduction

Our every day decision-making behaviour relating to food choice is taken in the context of considerations of health, naturalness, economy, convenience and what we perceive as 'risk'. Risk perception is now as important as any technical assessment of risk.

In order to communicate effectively with the consumer about food risks, the importance of the exchange of information and opinions among the interested parties is recognised (FAO/WHO, 1998). Risk communication is "not just a matter of ensuring that one's messages are delivered and listened to ..... also very much a process of empowering individuals .... to sharpen the skills necessary to make balanced judgements on risks", (Scherer 1991).

This **safefood** review, conducted on an all-island of Ireland basis, provides valuable insights into the perception of food safety risk from consumers on the island of Ireland and the food safety expert viewpoint. It explores the barriers to communicating with consumers on the island of Ireland about food safety risk. It also studies the barriers to promoting and practising good food hygiene - subgroups within the population are identified as being at 'high risk' because of inadequate levels of knowledge or more frequently resulting from not believing that the investment of time and effort in good food safety practice is worthwhile.

Recommendations are proposed that involve a collaborative approach with the media and education sectors. The need to target food safety messages at specific audiences using particular media and employing appropriate styles is outlined. Novel communication strategies are developed and aimed at enhancing the food safety communication process on the island of Ireland.

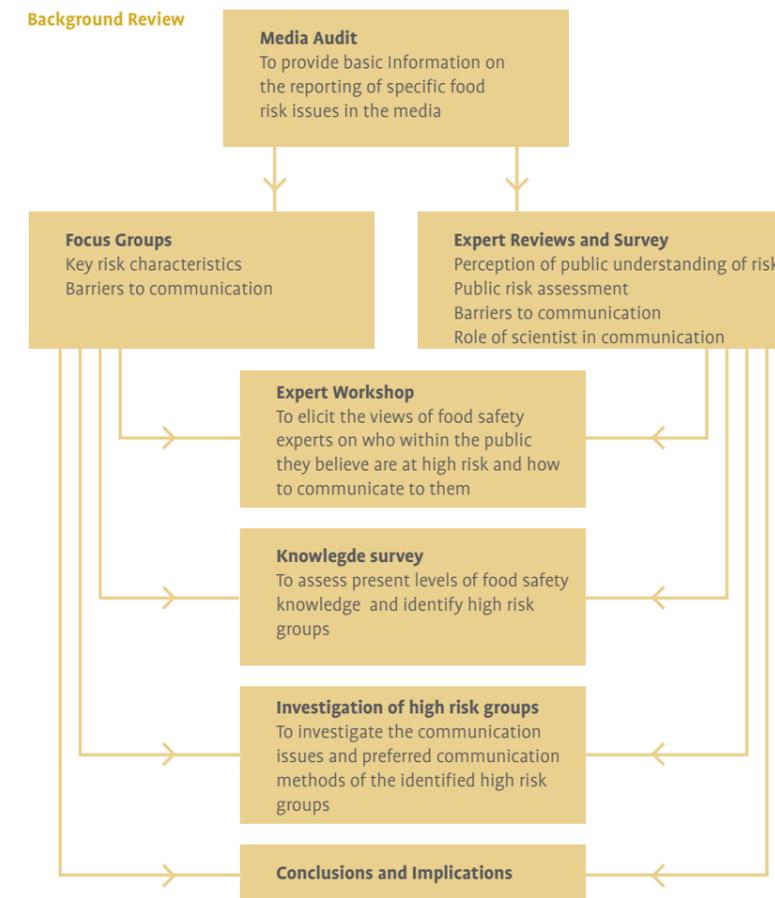
This report is relevant to all stakeholders in communications about food safety, from the consumer, educationalists, health promoters and professionals involved in clinical practice to media, marketing experts and agencies charged with providing consumer information on food safety.

# 2. Methodology

Six research studies were conducted to explore the views of the public on the island of Ireland and scientific food safety experts. The main aim of the work was to develop novel strategies for food risk communication. The in-depth studies on the island of Ireland look at consumer understanding of scientific messages related to a variety of food risks, exploring the potential barriers to effective risk communication and assessing differences in perceptions and motivation within and between specific demographic groups in society on the island of Ireland.

The research process comprised the six interconnected studies with the findings at each stage contributing to the subsequent stages.

Figure 1.1. Research framework



### 3. Key Findings

Figure 1.1. Research Framework

#### Media Audit

Media coverage of three food risks (Salmonella, genetically modified (GM) potatoes and acrylamide) from various media sources over a defined period were studied.

The research showed:

- Newspaper articles generally provided accurate information.
- Guidelines on prevention of exposure to these agents which were given in press releases by agencies and experts were often not included in articles.
- Broadsheet newspapers reported more food risk issues than tabloids and provincial papers.
- Coverage led the public to be quite well informed on *Salmonella*, but confused about GM and unaware of acrylamide.

#### Expert views of public understanding of risk

A survey of 400 experts from a variety of areas was undertaken.

This survey showed that public perception of risk deviates greatly from expert assessment.

- Certain risks, eg, GM and BSE are overrated while microbiological hazards are underrated by the public.
- Age, level of education and personal perception of vulnerability are key factors for the consumer.
- Conflict arises between simple clear messages and the need to communicate scientific uncertainty about risk.
- The media is a very powerful tool and should be used judiciously.
- Experts would appreciate further training and collaboration with the media.

#### Public's views on food risks

Twelve focus groups (8 in the Republic Of Ireland and 4 in Northern Ireland) explored the consumer perspective on food risks.

The findings revealed:

- Different categories of food safety risk were identified; production and technological hazards were acknowledged but not adequately understood, domestic hazards were controllable while out of home catering outlets were suspect.
- The media is a very powerful tool for providing information but it also carries unhelpful food advertising.
- School is considered an ideal setting for food-related education.
- Industry and Government are much less trusted than independent food safety bodies.
- Food risk messages are often thought to be confusing.
- Some consumers suffer 'information overload' while others want more information.
- High risk groups identified include males, persons living alone and those in low income groups.

#### Expert views on improved food risk communication

Two expert workshops debated methods and strategies for enhanced communication.

The following recommendations arose:

- A co-ordinated multi-sectoral, multi-pronged approach is required.
- Different messages and different audiences require disparate media treatments.

- The school setting and curriculum are key in terms of food safety practices.
- Practical novel proposals to support media communications are described.

### **Public food safety knowledge and practice**

A survey of a sample of 1025 consumers, representative of the population on the island of Ireland, was undertaken.

The survey showed;

- Knowledge levels are high but practice is often less than ideal.
- High risk groups were identified, males - (especially those living alone) and middle aged female homemakers with home economics education.
- Rationale given for risky food hygiene practices ranged from genuine disinterest in food to over confidence linked with the development of bad habits.

### **'High risk' groups understanding of risk**

Four workshops were conducted for each of three 'high risk' groups (12 workshops in total) to explore their specific viewpoints on food risk.

The workshops showed that:

- All participants engaged in a trade off between time and energy versus the potential gain of ideal food safety practices.
- All were concerned about harming others more than themselves.
- Young single males identified their mother as a key informant; saw risk as low and cost of change as high; favoured television as a mass communication medium and factual shocking presentations as credible.

- Female homemakers deviated from ideal practices because of mis-placed self confidence and bad habit formation; favoured day time discussion radio programmes and newspapers articles and wanted solution focused messages.
- Older males living alone have a fatalistic attitude to food risk, considered the cost of change as high and engaged in tactics to avoid food handling where possible.

## 4. Major Recommendations

Food safety risk communication must:

- Identify the audience – different target audiences will have different barriers to changing their food safety behaviours. For some it will be time constraints, for others interest in food and for others misplaced confidence.
- Use the most appropriate media source – television, media, web and print media will each appeal to different segments of the population.
- Use the appropriate style of communication – different target audiences and different messages require disparate styles, be they shock tactics, discussion, human interest or ‘expert’ delivered information.
- Use the educational setting as a venue for providing food safety information and also for showing good examples in practice.
- Involve a co-ordinated multi-pronged approach, one method alone will not be effective.

For further information please contact **safefood** on +353 (0)21 2304100 or [info@safefoodonline.ie](mailto:info@safefoodonline.ie)

*safefood – The Food Safety Promotion Board*  
*7 Eastgate Avenue, Eastgate, Little Island, Co. Cork.*

**biaslán – an Bord um Chur Chun Cinn Sábháilteachta Bia**  
7 Ascaill an Gheata Thoir, An tOileán Beag, Co. Chorcaí.

**Tel:** +353 (0)21 230 4100 **Fax:** +353 (0)21 230 4111  
**Email:** [info@safefoodonline.com](mailto:info@safefoodonline.com) **Web:** [www.safefoodonline.com](http://www.safefoodonline.com)

**HELPLINE**  
**NI 0800 085 1683**  
**ROI 1850 40 4567**  
[www.safefoodonline.com](http://www.safefoodonline.com)