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PRESS RELEASE

New research results on EU consumers' perceptions of food-related risks

The majority of Europeans associate food and eating with enjoyment. According to a new Eurobarometer survey published today, those who are concerned about possible food-related risks tend to worry more about chemical contamination of food rather than bacterial contamination or health and nutrition issues. The poll also showed most Europeans have confidence in national and European food safety agencies as information sources on possible risks associated with food.

“Understanding consumers’ perception of risk is critical to providing timely, clear and effective communications regarding food safety. The Eurobarometer findings highlight the importance of EFSA’s work and reaffirm the Authority as a trusted source of information. Moving forward, EFSA will use these learnings to help shape the future of its work in communications.” said European Food Safety Authority Executive Director Catherine Geslain-Lanéelle.

When asked about their perceptions of food, the majority of respondents associated to a large extent food and eating with enjoyment, such as selecting fresh and tasty food (58%), or the pleasure of having meals with family and friends (54%). Less than half of respondents (44%) focused on concerns such as looking for affordable prices and satisfying hunger. Fewer respondents were concerned about the safety of food (37%) or nutritional issues such as checking calories and nutrients (23%).

When placed in the context of other risks that could personally affect them, more EU citizens ranked the economic crisis (20%) and environmental pollution (18%) as very likely to affect their lives compared with the possible risk of food damaging their health (11%).

Public concerns about food-related risks

No single widespread concern about food-related risks was mentioned spontaneously by a majority of respondents – 19% cited chemicals, pesticides and other substances as the major concerns, while 1 in 10 answered that there was no problem at all with food. When then prompted by a list of possible issues associated with food, respondents mentioned as risks to be “very worried” about: chemical residues from pesticides in fruit, vegetables and cereals 31% (up 3 percentage points compared to 2005); antibiotics or hormones in meat 30% (up 3 points on 2005); cloning animals for food products 30% and pollutants such as mercury in fish and dioxins in pork 29% (up 3 points on 2005). Fewer people were “very worried” about bacterial contamination of foods (23%) and even fewer about possible nutritional risks like putting on weight (15%) or not having a healthy/balanced diet (15%).

Public confidence in information sources on food-related risks

The survey found that EU citizens expressed the highest level of confidence in information obtained from doctors and other health professionals (84%), followed by family and friends (82%), consumer

organisations (76%), scientists (73%) and environmental protection groups (71%). National and European food safety agencies (EFSA) and EU institutions drew a relatively high level of confidence at 64% and 57% respectively, with national governments at 47%.

Asked how they respond to information on food-related matters communicated in the media or on the Internet, around half said they ignored stories in the media or worried about them but did not change their eating habits. There appears to be a greater tendency to ignore information regarding diet and health issues (29%) than food safety-related risks (24%).

EU food safety system – consumers feel protected

There is broad agreement that public authorities do a lot to ensure that food is safe in Europe, that public authorities are quick to act, base their decisions on scientific evidence and do a good job in informing people about food-related risks. The level of agreement is higher than in 2005. Opinion is more divided on whether scientific advice and public authorities are independent from other interests. While 46% of respondents agree that public authorities in the EU view the health of citizens as more important than the profits of producers (up 7 percentage points on 2005), 42% disagree with this statement and 12% said they do not know. More than 81% of respondents believe public authorities should do more to ensure that food is healthy and to inform people about healthy diets and lifestyles.

“This survey really gives us a fascinating insight into what Europeans are currently thinking about food and possible risks associated with food and we are happy to be able to share the findings with our colleagues in EU Member States,” said EFSA Director of Communications Anne-Laure Gassin. “It is also positive to see food is associated with pleasure, that national and European food safety agencies are thought to be doing a good job and, in particular, that scientists are very much viewed as trusted sources of information.”

The Eurobarometer findings will provide an important resource for carrying out further research on the relation between trust in information sources, confidence in public authorities and perception of food-related risks.

Notes to Editors:

The poll, commissioned by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), was the second such study to be carried out in five years. The research objectives were to gain insights into consumer concerns relating to food and risks associated with the food chain and to establish the level of consumer confidence in public authorities on food safety-related issues.

The survey was carried out on a representative sample of 26,691 individuals, aged 15 or over in all 27 Member States. It was conducted through face-to-face interviews with consumers in their mother tongue from 9th to 30th June, 2010. The responses of those surveyed represent the views of over 500 million European consumers. It follows that a 1% value represents the views of 5 million consumers, thus even small percentage values represent the views of a large number of people. The survey was carried out by TNS Opinion and Social network.

Top concerns in Member States:

Pesticide residues in fruit, vegetables and cereals – is of overall highest concern in 12 Member States: Greece (91%); Lithuania (88%); Italy (85%); Luxembourg (85%); Bulgaria (84%); Hungary (84%); France (80%); Malta (77%); Slovenia (75%); Germany (75%); Belgium (72%); Austria (67%).

The quality and freshness of food – is of the highest level of concern in: Latvia (94%); Lithuania (88%); Portugal (86%); Spain (80%); Denmark (77%); Malta (77%); Estonia (74%); Ireland (66%).

Welfare of farmed animals – is of the highest level of concern in the following countries: Sweden (74%); Finland (66%); United Kingdom (67%).

Food poisoning from bacteria like salmonella in eggs or listeria in cheese – is the greatest concern in: Bulgaria (84%); the Czech Republic (77%); Slovakia (72%).

Additives such as colours, preservatives or flavouring used in food or drink – are of highest concern in: Poland (79%); Romania (70%).

Residues such as antibiotics or hormones in meat - are the largest source of concern in: Cyprus (99%); Netherlands (63%).

80% of French respondents expressed worry about **pollutants** like mercury, the same level of worry registered in that country for **pesticide residues**. In Austria, respondents are equally concerned about two issues – **pesticides and GMOs**, each at 67%.

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