

Risk Issues

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MAIN FINDINGS

The survey on risk issues reveals that when presented with a list of possible risks, environmental pollution and car accidents are those which the largest proportion of the population (61% and 51% respectively) considers likely to affect them personally. However, more than 40% of people also think that their health could be damaged by the food they eat or by other consumer goods.

Nonetheless, the thought of food generally has positive connotations for Europeans. They associate it first and foremost with taste and pleasure while, when purchasing food, they are more guided by the quality and price of food than by health and food safety concerns. The association of food with health is only made by one person in five.

When people are asked to specifically cite any problems or risks associated with food, many things spontaneously come to mind but without any sense of unanimity. Food poisoning comes to mind most often (16%), followed by chemicals (14%) and obesity (13%). For 7% of respondents food does not present any risks or problems at all.

However, when consumers are reminded of the possible risks associated with food (through the presentation of a closed list of potential issues), concerns appear to be quite widespread. The main finding is that people do not differentiate greatly between the various types of risks although they are more likely to worry about risks caused by external factors over which they have no control. At the top end of the "worry" scale, consumers express concern regarding external factors that are clearly identified as dangerous (pesticides residues, new viruses such as avian influenza, residues in meats, contamination of food by bacteria, unhygienic conditions outside home). In the mid-range, one finds other external factors such as environmental pollutants (e.g. mercury), GMOs, food additives, animal welfare and "mad cow disease" or BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy). Consumers appear to be less concerned about personal factors (such as individual susceptibility to food allergies) or other factors linked to their own behaviour (e.g. food preparation, food hygiene at home and putting on weight).

Worry is an important determinant of people's attitudes to food safety and, in particular, on how they respond to information about food safety. Whilst the analysis of results points to significant differences between the Member States, it should be kept in mind that this does not necessarily reflect the actual situation in the various countries with respect to food safety. It is rather indicative of differences observed in respondents' propensity to worry and to admit to being worried about potential food safety risks. Also, it is well known that cultural differences exist when it comes to expressing attitudes, concerns or perceptions regarding risks, and food-related risks in particular.

The analysis also shows that there is a profile of worriers. One third of the population demonstrated a pattern of being "very worried". Women and people with a lower level of education tend to be over-represented in this category, but other factors such as age or occupation did not seem to greatly influence responses. At the other end of the scale, the "not very worried" group accounts for one fifth of the population.

In terms of health and consumer protection policies, the survey shows that a high proportion of EU citizens have heard about EU legislation. Awareness of health warnings on cigarette packs scored the highest (85%), reflecting the high impact of

this policy. Very good scores are also obtained for awareness of consumer rights (66%) and food safety (61%) rules.

There is a strong level of confidence in public authorities' actions in the field of health; 54% think that their health concerns are taken seriously by the EU and 55% believe that authorities react quickly. That said, 47% of citizens think that when deciding on priorities, authorities would favour the economic interests of producers over the health of consumers.

Turning to food specifically, 58% are confident that public authorities account for the most recent scientific evidence in taking decisions regarding food risk and one in two praises public authorities for their work in informing citizens about food-related risks. While 62% of EU citizens agree that food safety laws in the EU are strict, some reservations emerge regarding their enforcement, with only 46% who consider that this is properly done. Overall, nearly half the consumers surveyed agree that public authorities in the EU are doing enough with respect to food safety risks, while one third would like to see them do more.

Public opinion on the evolution of food safety over the last ten years is divided: 38% consider that it has improved, 29% feel that it has stayed about the same and 28% believe that we are now worse off. People who believe the latter are mostly those who also have the most pessimistic opinion on risks in the area of food safety.

When it comes to assessing sources of information, it appears that media reports on health, food safety and consumer protection reach a vast majority of citizens. Most of those surveyed recalled seeing or reading something in the media over the past 6 months related to the topics just mentioned, and in particular with regard to tobacco, obesity and alcohol.

Amongst those who recall having seen or heard media reports on unsafe or unhealthy food, the majority states that as a result, they have either permanently changed their eating habits (16%) or avoided the food mentioned in the story for a while (37%). Again, the extent to which people are concerned about food safety is related to the way in which they react to media coverage of food-related problems. The fact that over 40% either ignore stories which they come across in the media or worry about these but do nothing has important implications for risk communications.

Finally, the survey shows that consumer groups, physicians or doctors, and scientists, are the most trusted sources when it comes to providing information about food risks, followed by public authorities. Media generate a fairly low level of trust while, as found in other consumer research, economic operators (manufacturers, farmers and retailers) are cited as being amongst the least trusted sources.

In summary, whilst Europeans indicate they are worried about health-related risks, those concerning food appear to be less salient. Overall, food has positive connotations of taste and pleasure; concerns regarding health and food safety are not top-of-mind. When confronted with possible risks associated with food, consumers identify a wide range of concerns and tend to worry most about those factors which they cannot themselves control. Clearly identifiable groups are more liable to worry about risks than others, suggesting that in order to be effective, communication on risks may need to be tailored to meet specific needs of target audiences.