

## Media and public concerns about food risks: Experts' views

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A significant proportion of European citizens (42 %) believes that the food they eat will damage their health. Among EU consumers, around a quarter are very worried about food contamination issues like pesticides residues, pollutants such as dioxins, contamination by bacteria such as *salmonella* or genetically modified products in food or drinks (European Commission, 2006).

Previous research has found that public perceptions of risks, including food risks, differ from perceptions of 'experts' (Savadori et al., 2004). Experts on food risks tend to describe these public concerns as "irrational" or "excessive".

Recently, De Boer et al., (2005) examined the perceptions of food safety experts regarding public understanding of food risk issues and food risk messages on the island of Ireland. Their findings indicated that most experts surveyed had little confidence in the public's understanding of food risk issues and believed that the media tend to communicate information that is misleading.

Research addressed to study experts' views on Spanish public concerns about food risks is scarce. With the aim of fulfill this gap we conduct the present study.

### OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study were to examine Spanish experts' views on: (1) public beliefs about food safety and food risk messages; (2) public concerns regarding food issues; (3) the role of food experts in risk communication; (4) the impact of the media on public concerns.

### METHOD

A web-based survey, adapted from De Boer et al., (2005), was completed by 120 food scientists (20% response rate) drawn from different scientific and academic institutions across Spain (88.3% from universities, 5% from research center, 6.7% from other institutions).

### RESULTS

#### Public's LEVEL OF UNDERSTANDING of.....

	Mean (SD)
Food topics in general is	2.32 (.73) <sup>a</sup>
Food handling practices is	2.24 (.77) <sup>a</sup>
Technological topics in food production is	1.65 (.69) <sup>b</sup>
Biotechnological issues (GMO, etc) is	1.26 (.49) <sup>c</sup>

1 = very low 5 = very high

GMO, genetically modified organisms

<sup>ab</sup> Means with different superscripts differ at  $p < .001$  (Wilcoxon sign-rank test)

#### Public's UNDERSTANDING of food risk topics is influenced by.....

	Mean (SD)
Educational level	3.77 (.92) <sup>a</sup>
Age	3.14 (.78) <sup>b</sup>
Live environment (rural/urban)	3.01 (1.01) <sup>b</sup>
Economic level	2.70 (.88) <sup>c</sup>

1 = not at all 5 = very much

<sup>abc</sup> Means with different superscripts differ at  $p < .001$  (Wilcoxon sign-rank test)

#### Expert views on public concerns or worries about food-related risks

	% Agree or strongly agree	Mean (SD)
The public concerns about food risk issues have increased over the last years	97.5	1.68 (.55)
The public is more worried about novel risks rather than about established risks	91.7	1.74 (.75)
The public concerns about food risk issues is driven by the media	95.0	1.58 (.71)
Some groups among the public often overreact to food risk messages	96.7	1.53 (.56)
The public expects absolute statements on food risks	88.3	1.79 (.68)

1 = strongly agree 5 = strongly disagree

#### Public's CONCERNS or WORRIES about food-related risks is influenced by...

	Mean (SD)
Media	4.28 (.79) <sup>a</sup>
Educational level	3.67 (.83) <sup>b</sup>
Age	3.14 (.84) <sup>c</sup>
Lack of trust in food industry	3.09 (.99) <sup>cd</sup>
Lack of trust in regulatory institutions	2.97 (.99) <sup>ce</sup>
Economic level	2.87 (.82) <sup>de</sup>

1 = not at all 5 = very much

<sup>abcde</sup> Means with different superscripts differ at  $p < .001$  (Wilcoxon sign-rank test)

#### Expert views on FOOD RISK MESSAGES

	% Agree or strongly agree	Mean (SD)
Newspaper coverage of food risk issues is often misleading	82.5	1.93 (.76)
The language used in official food risk messages is often too technical	60.0	2.45 (1.15)
The important food safety risks are rarely mentioned on national media	50.8	2.63 (.98)
Media usually put a "slant" on food risk messages to maximize the impact	86.7	1.68 (.78)
In general, the standard of reporting by the media on food risk issues is high	16.7	3.43 (.89)
There needs to be more scientific content in food risk messages in media	73.3	2.18 (.90)

1 = strongly agree 5 = strongly disagree

#### ROLE of food experts in risk communication

	% Agree or strongly agree	Mean (SD)
Scientists are correct not to make absolute statements	84.2	1.91 (.97)
Only peer-reviewed scientific findings should be communicated to the public	60.8	2.45 (1.15)
Scientists should get training on how to interact with the media	88.3	1.80 (.88)
Scientists should not communicate directly with the media	10.0	3.76 (.84)
Scientists have a responsibility to correct misleading information in the media	80.8	1.88 (1.10)

1 = strongly agree 5 = strongly disagree

### CONCLUSIONS

Our findings confirm the results of previous research (De Boer et al., 2005) in which experts were not very confident in the public's understanding of food risk issues and showed negative opinions about media influences on worries about food safety. In addition, experts also believe that people expects absolute statements about food risks but, at the same time, indicate that scientists are correct not to make absolute statements.

Most experts believed that media coverage of food risk issues is misleading. Both mass media and education level were rated as having more influence on worries about food issues than income. Many experts believed that scientists should get training on how to interact with the media.

### References

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