

Keeping an eye on perceived risks

The BfR Consumer Monitor is one of the main instruments of consumer health protection. It shows how risks are perceived by the general public.

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It's very important for us to know for sure what concerns the population and why.

What topics interest consumers? What are they familiar with and what concerns them? The answers to these questions are given in the BfR Consumer Monitor, a representative population survey that has been conducted regularly since 2014 by the BfR to determine the public's general estimation of consumer protection topics. To supplement this, the BfR conducts representative surveys on individual subject matters which are of particular topical interest, such as antimicrobial resistance and plant protection products. The results of these appear as the "BfR Consumer Monitor Special". The Consumer Monitor is an essential indicator which allows the early recognition of possible misunderstandings or false estimations on the part of the general public. "It's very important for us to know specifically what the concerns of the population are so that we can decide what communicative measures are required," explains PD Dr. Gaby-Fleur Böl, head of the Risk Communication department at the BfR.

Data collection method

To conduct the representative survey for the Consumer Monitor, approx. 1,000 persons living in private households in Germany who are at least 14 years old are interviewed over the telephone by market and opinion research institutions on behalf of the BfR. These computer-supported interviews use a programmed questionnaire and are conducted by trained interviewers in what is known for short as the CATI method – computer-assisted telephone interviewing. In the process, the questions on consumer health protection and other thematic areas are compiled into a so-called omnibus or multiple topic survey. The questions in the Consumer Monitor can have an open character (unprompted questions) or closed formulation (prompted questions). Each survey is structured in a similar way so that the results of the Consumer Monitor surveys can be compared with one another over time. The BfR dedicates itself on the one hand to topics which receive a lot of attention among the general public. On the other hand though, it analyses questions which have not so much been the focus of public attention but which are nevertheless relevant, such as health-damaging plant substances. Questions are also asked about the degree of trust in the structures of consumer health protection, as this can also influence the perception of risks.



Goals of the Consumer Monitor

- > Assessment and analysis of trends and topics in consumer perception
- > Over- or underestimation of health risks by the general public
- > Observation of changes in consumer behaviour
- > Rapid assessment of consumer perception in crisis situations

Interests of consumers

The view of consumers that food in Germany is safe has hardly changed over the years. When the unprompted question is asked about the greatest health risks, the answers given most often in the most recent Consumer Monitor (08/2017) are still smoking, climate and environmental pollution and an unhealthy or wrong diet, followed by alcohol and unhealthy or contaminated foods. When specific prompted questions about selected topics are asked, salmonella, genetically modified foods, antimicrobial resistance and plant protection product residues are the topics most people are aware of. These are also the four topics which are a cause for concern with most respondents. It has been shown repeatedly that

consumers underestimate risks which are classified as relevant to health from the point of view of risk assessment, such as food hygiene in the home. The general public is largely unaware of a new method of genetic engineering which is currently a topic of discussion in scientific circles, so-called “genome editing”.

Strengthen trust

Different population groups perceive incidents or occurrences in different ways. How great a risk appears to be depends on a lot of factors. Perceptions of laymen and experts can differ in particular, as the intuitive risk estimation of the general public is often based on other principles and criteria than the scientific risk assessment. It is known from risk perception research, for example,

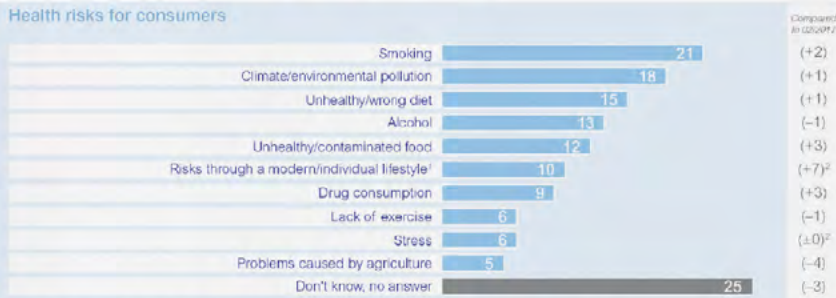
that concerns about synthetically produced substances are greater than concerns about substances that occur naturally, such as toxic plant substances.

The BfR Consumer Monitor special on plant protection products also shows that a majority of the general public wrongly assumes that plant protection product residues are not allowed to be contained in foods in general. In actual fact, however, residues of authorised plant protection products are permitted and classified as safe up to the maximum residue level. Risk communication can respond specifically to this discrepancy by providing the general public with comprehensive information on the legal and scientific foundations of the risk assessment of plant protection products through suitable communication channels.

The results of population surveys of this kind provide important insights into the risk perception of various population groups and show the differences linked with demographic factors such as age, educational background, profession and gender. Thus, for example, more women than men are aware of the occurrence of pyrrolizidine alkaloids in herbal tea. It has also been shown that men are less concerned than women about process contaminants in barbecued meat.

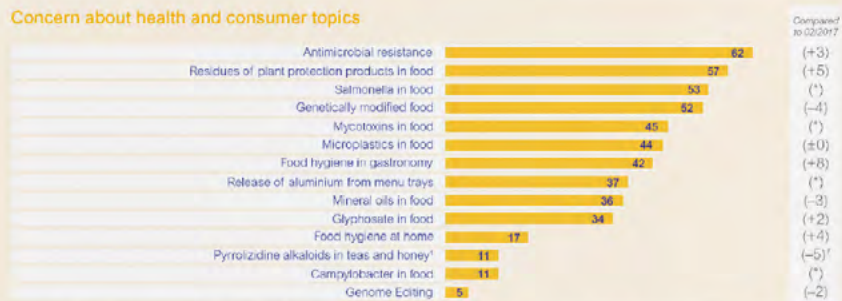
With the Consumer Monitor, the BfR has established an instrument with which a response can be given to information and communication requirements even earlier, thus further strengthening public trust in consumer health protection. ■

Which topics do you personally regard as the biggest health risks for consumers?



Shown: The ten most common spontaneously mentioned risks. Basis: 1,001; Figures given as percentages (compared to 02/2017; percentage points).
¹ Among others: consumption of digital media (1.2 %), television (0.8 %), the internet (0.7 %), lack of sleep (0.7 %).
² Not among the ten most frequently mentioned risks in 02/2017.

To what extent are you personally concerned or unconcerned about the following health and consumer topics?



Shown: Percentage "concerned" (scale values 1-5). Basis: 1,001; Figures given as percentages (compared to 02/2017; percentage points).
¹ Not asked in 02/2017; Wording in 02/2017: "Pyrrolizidine alkaloids in herbal teas and teas".

All previously published BfR Consumer Monitor surveys can be accessed at: www.bfr.bund.de/en
 > Publications > Brochures
 > BfR Consumer Monitor