

Consumers and food recalls: what does the public want to hear?

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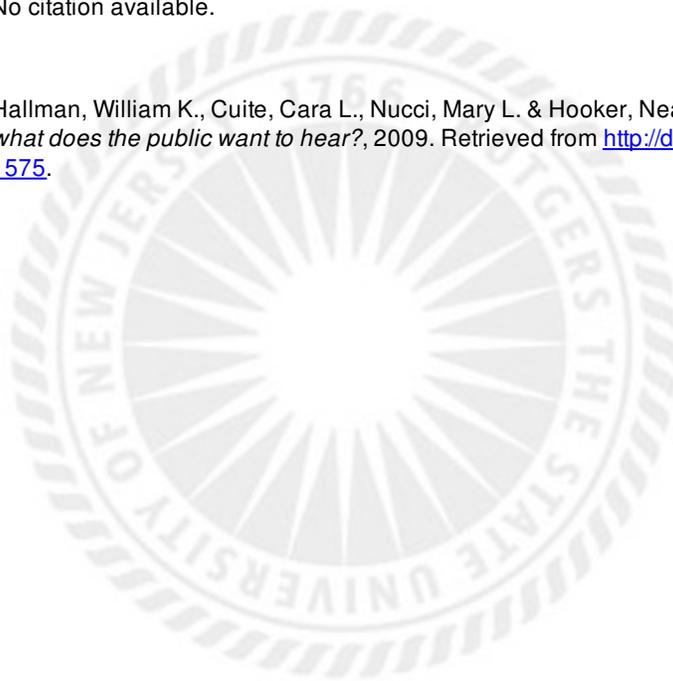
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Introduction

Communicating with the public about food recalls is challenging. The public must be alerted to the problem such that people know which products to appropriately avoid. In addition, those who may have purchased the food prior to the recall must be motivated to check for the product, have enough information to determine whether what they have purchased is part of the recall, and, if so, be convinced that they should discard or return it.

This poster illustrates the American public's current perceptions of the food recall system, describes the frequency of food recall behaviors among consumers, and identifies what the public wants to know when they first hear about a food recall and how to best motivate people to respond appropriately to food recalls.

Survey Methodology

FPI contracted with a survey research firm to conduct telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,101 Americans selected from all 50 states. Interviews were conducted in English with non-institutionalized adults over the age of 17 between August 4 and September 24, 2008. Participant households were selected using proportional random-digit dialing, and a Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI) system was programmed to select the appropriate proportions of male and female participants. Working non-business numbers were contacted using a 12-callback design. Response rates can be calculated using a range of formulas. For the current study, the response rate using standard industry definitions (American Association for Public Opinion Research) ranged from 25% to 57%.

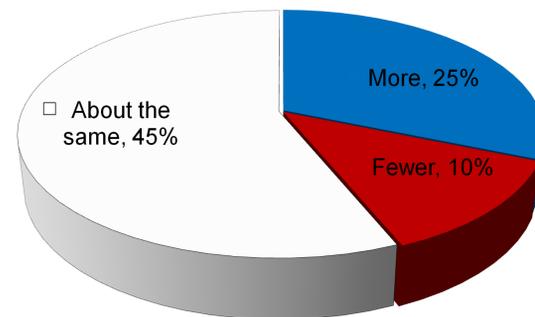
Because of the large number of topics covered in the survey and the limited amount of time respondents are willing to stay on the phone, we used a split sample design for some of the questions. All data presented here have been weighted by gender, age, race, region, and education to approximate United States Census figures, unless noted otherwise.

Results

PERCEIVED FREQUENCY OF FOOD RECALLS

Eighty percent of the sample said it was true that "Food recalls have been happening more frequently" (14% said false, and 5% said that they did not know). However, we saw a different pattern of responses when we asked respondents if they thought that number of recalls of specific types of food had increased, decreased, or stayed the same from 2006 to 2007. Figure 1 depicts responses to a question about recalls of "meat and poultry," though responses for "foods other than meat and poultry" were very similar.

Figure 1. Were there more, fewer, or about the same number of recalls in 2007 as there were in 2006?



Taken together, these data indicate that Americans have a general sense that there has been an increase in the frequency of food recalls, but that this increase has been taking place over a time frame longer than a single year.

KNOWLEDGE OF FOOD SAFETY SYSTEM

A series of true/false questions elicited knowledge about the food safety system, illustrated in Table 1. The correct responses are highlighted in pink.

Table 1. Americans' knowledge of food safety system

	%True	%False	%Don't know
There is always at least one food recall in effect at any time*	45	42	13
The Food and Drug Administration is responsible for recalls of meat and poultry	73	14	13
Under law, the government can force any food company to recall a contaminated product	80	9	11

FOOD RECALL BEHAVIORS

More than half of Americans (59%) report having looked in their homes at least once for a recalled food product, leaving a sizeable percentage who have *never* done so. Among those who have checked their homes, 35% report having found a recalled food. Regardless of whether they had found recalled foods in their homes, we asked respondents about actions motivated by food recalls. More than one-quarter (28%) say that they have thrown out food and 9% report having returned a food to the store as a result of a food recall. Finally, more than one-in-ten (12% of the overall sample) report that they have knowingly eaten a recalled food.

INFORMATION DESIRED

To provide useful recommendations to those communicating directly with the public, we asked consumers what they thought the media should tell Americans during a food recall and what information would be most motivating for them to check their homes.

When asked to rate the importance of types of information that the media provide to the public in stories about food recalls, the topics that were rated as most important were:

- The illnesses and symptoms caused by eating the recalled product
- Whether anyone has become ill from eating the product
- The date on the package
- The brands affected and the lot number on the package

Table 2 provides the top four statements ranked as most likely to motivate consumers to check their homes for recalled foods. The types of information that respondents rated as less motivating were about the company involved, such as whether the company was foreign or American, or whether the company had other products previously recalled.

Table 2. Rank ordering of most "motivating" statements

Rank	Statement
1	A large number of people across the country have reportedly become ill from eating this food.
2	The recalled product should be thrown in the garbage.
3	One person in your town has reportedly become ill from eating this food.
4	The recalled products can be returned for a full refund.

Conclusions

Many Americans do not understand how the food system works. The findings presented here indicate that while many Americans have looked for recalled food in their homes, a significant number have not. A small minority of Americans have actively disregarded public health advice by knowingly eating recalled food.

As food safety communicators devise new strategies to reach the public and motivate them to check their homes, it is important to include both messages that they want to hear and those that may be most likely to inspire action. Communications that include information about the illnesses associated with the outbreak are of primary concern to the public: including symptoms, how many people have become ill and where those illness occurred. The second type of information important to the public is identifying features of the recalled food, including the date, lot number and brand information. Finally, letting the public know what they should do with the food once they find it is key; in particular, whether the food should be discarded or returned to the store.

Acknowledgements

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