



Asia-Pacific
Economic Cooperation



Guideline on Food Safety Risk Communication During a Food Safety Incident Emergency or Crisis

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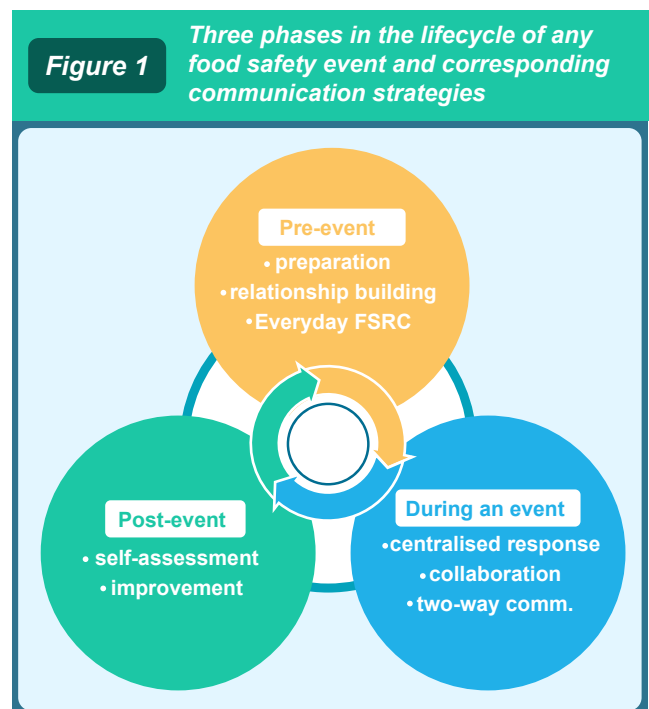
INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this Guideline is to provide information regarding food safety risk communication (FSRC) from food safety regulatory authorities to the public during a food safety incident, emergency or crisis (generically referred to as events). This Guideline applies the eight Principles detailed in the APEC FSRC Framework (hereafter referred to as the Framework) to these food safety events.

The lifecycle of any food safety event comprises pre, during and post phases. Figure 1 shows these three general phases of event response and examples of the corresponding FSRC strategies. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [summarises](#) the cyclic nature of crisis response with the statements ‘As the response progresses, available information and audience needs change. Communication demand, resources and strategies must adapt to meet the evolving needs.’

Throughout the three phases of a food safety event, the FSRC process is iterative and requires continual

improvement (Principle 8). Improvement requires regular monitoring of the food environment for potential events, which is part of the process of emerging issue identification (*Guideline on Everyday Food Safety Risk Communication*) and regular evaluation and updating of the FSRC plan (*Guideline on Monitoring and Review of Competent Authority’s Food Safety Risk Communication System*).



Before a food safety event (pre-event)

The pre-event phase of a food safety event occurs prior to the food safety event when a competent authority is operating under everyday conditions. This phase is crucial because the actions significantly impact how an organisation will perform during the other two phases. The pre-event communication strategies are centered around

The linkages to the principles in the Framework and other guidelines work only when the guideline is a part of the overall document of “APEC Food Safety Risk Communication and Associated Guidelines

internal preparation and relationship building, for example, establishing and testing communication protocols and investing in stakeholder engagement (*Guideline on Everyday Food Safety Risk Communication*).

Internal preparation during this pre-event phase is critical to success. Preparation includes developing a FSRC plan. It is also recommended to have a communication component in event specific plans such as recall plans, outbreak investigation protocols and food safety response during natural disasters.

Pre-event activity planning (Textbox 1) allows prompt response to a food safety event (*Guideline on Everyday Food Safety Risk Communication*).

As noted in Principle 5 of the Framework, various stakeholders share FSRC roles and responsibilities. Relationship building with these different stakeholder groups is critical to building trust and developing a single source of authoritative information on food safety practices, foodborne illness prevention and minimisation and crisis communications. While these efforts target various interested parties (Principle 6) this Guideline focuses on relationship building between the competent authorities and the public, which requires building public trust (as defined in the Framework) in the competent authority. As explained in the Framework, public trust is created by communicating in a transparent and timely manner (Principle 2), using a two-way communication process (Principle 3), and disseminating credible information based on science and evidence (Principle 4).

Textbox 1

Things to do before a food safety event:

- 1 Write a FSRC Plan
 - Identify core communication response team
 - Identify others who can help if a situation escalates (see next section)
 - Assign communication responsibilities
 - Identify likely audiences for likely food safety events
 - Establish a communication approval process
 - Identify audience-appropriate communication delivery channels suitable during a fast-paced event
 - Prepare to use those channels (i.e., if social media is a desired channel, establish a presence now. See *Guideline on Using Social Media Engagement for Food Safety Risk Communication*)
 - Draft and test messages / communication materials
 - Identify and train spokespersons to deliver messages
- 2 Practice the plan annually
- 3 Update the plan as needed
- 4 Invest in stakeholder engagement / relationship building

● During a food safety event

When an event or potential event is detected, the ‘during an event’ response phase begins. According to the established protocols in the competent authority’s FSRC plan, the designated communication response personnel are activated. The event response is evaluated according to the competent authority’s response threshold (incident, emergency or crisis).

During this phase it is typical to:

- gather information
- assess the potential risks associated with the event and determine the corresponding communication response level
- identify event-specific communication needs of the affected segments of the public
- determine the message content, channels and form.


Information gathering

In the gathering information phase it is necessary to ensure an accurate and complete understanding of the event, regardless of the response level.

Textbox 2

Questions to ask in the early stages of a food safety event:

- What happened?
- What food is affected, and where and to whom was it distributed?
- Who is involved?
- Who is affected? Impact?
- When did it happen?
- Where did it happen?
- Why did it happen (cause)
- How did it happen (root cause)?

As suggested in the *FAO/WHO Guide for Application of Risk Analysis Principles and Procedures during Food Safety Emergencies*  the communication team needs to work with those conducting the risk assessment and risk management (risk assessors and risk managers) to collect information. Questions can be used to seek information in the early stages of a food safety event (Textbox 2) while noting that, especially in the initial phase of an event, there can be many unknowns, and answers to some of the questions may not be available (communicating about uncertainties will be discussed later in this section).

One of the challenges includes identifying and understanding the diverse stakeholders and sectors of the public who might be affected by the event and want or need information. Based on an ongoing understanding of the event, it is necessary to determine potential health impacts on those with a high likelihood of exposure to the affected food. Once these stakeholders are identified, it is possible to develop messages that meet informational needs and identify the most effective communication delivery channels under existing circumstances. The relationship building carried out in the pre-event phase will help the competent authority make these decisions within the context of the targeted audiences' social and economic status and cultures and values.

Potential risks and communication response level

The communication response to a food safety event should be commensurate with the magnitude, or potential impact on public health. The appropriate response level depends on several factors. See Textbox 3 and *FAO/WHO framework for developing national food safety emergency response plans* and Heads of European Food Safety Agencies' *Guidelines for Management and Communications during Food and Feed Safety Incidents*. Each of these factors can contribute to the escalation of a food safety event.

As the event escalates, the FSRC response will require increasing amounts of resources, management involvement and coordination between relevant competent authorities and other major stakeholders. In this Guideline the various types of events - 'incident', 'emergency' and 'crisis' - are defined by the increase in risk to and impact on public health.

An incident is an event, whether accidental or intentional, that is identified by a competent authority as constituting a minor and (as yet) uncontrolled foodborne risk to public health requiring action to be taken to prevent adverse events. The competent authority may be able to handle the FSRC response to relevant stakeholders with minimal to no external agency assistance. As defined by Heads of European Food Safety Agencies'

Textbox 3

Factors used to determine the seriousness of a food safety event and the corresponding response effort:

- What food(s) are affected and how are they typically consumed?
- Effects on public health - the magnitude of adverse health implications and likelihood of being infected/affected
- Number of people/vulnerable groups affected
- Whether the cause is known or unknown
- Public perception of risk
- Media interest
- Coordination with others required to properly manage the event
- Food production and supply and distribution chain complexity.

Guidelines for Management and Communications during Food and Feed Safety Incidents, the ‘effects on consumer health may range from mild to requiring hospital care; public risk perception is low; media has limited attention to this incident, and the cause is known (i.e., mycotoxins, heavy metals, mold, and minor food poisoning, glass particles of a size that can be readily detected by the targeted consumers, ...).’

An emergency is defined as by Codex Alimentarius as an event, whether accidental or intentional, that is identified by a competent authority as constituting a serious and as yet uncontrolled foodborne risk to public health that requires urgent action. In an emergency situation, a medium to high number of consumers (as defined by the competent authority) will require hospital care and deaths may result; public risk perception is medium to high, and there is some media interest. The competent authority may require additional internal collaboration to address the event.



A crisis is defined as an event, whether accidental or intentional, that has been identified by a competent authority as constituting a very serious and (as yet) uncontrolled foodborne risk to public health that requires immediate action. This will cause serious public health consequences, hospitalisations and deaths. Many people will be affected, and the risk perception among the public will be high. A crisis will often be associated with notable economic impacts in the form of lost food business, lost productivity, lost trade and healthcare costs. A crisis also requires the competent authority to coordinate with other internal (within the same economy) and/or external (other economies) agencies to manage the crisis.

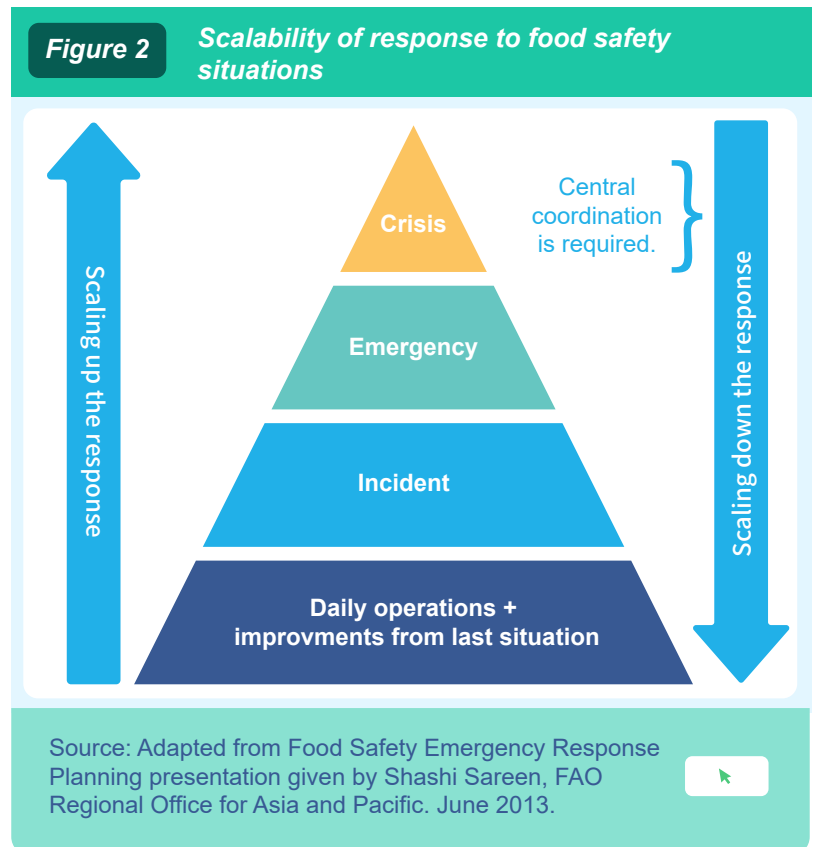


Some crises do not jeopardise public health but can still create a need for food risk communication because they threaten the public’s confidence in the food supply or in the competent authority, for example, in the situation of food fraud. Subject to regulatory responsibility, these non-food safety events can still trigger a competent authority’s crisis communication response. A competent authority’s

crisis/emergency response plan or protocol is inclusive of the FSRC plan. This Guideline is limited to FSRC under a food safety incident, emergency or crisis.

Responses to different food safety events are scalable (Figure 2). Any combination of the factors identified may result in an emergency or crisis. The final determination is dependent upon the competent authority's assessment of the situation and ability to respond. Once the competent authority has assessed the event's seriousness, it can best identify the response team(s) and needed resources.

Central coordination (Figure 2) is especially important during an emergency or a crisis. 'Central coordination' in this Guideline refers to deliberate engagement in an organised and coordinated FSRC response with the various competent and relevant authorities in a single economy, as well as with those of other APEC economies when applicable. This multi-agency coordination occurs across different disciplines, jurisdictions and government agencies. The different domestic and/or international competent authority sectors that may have roles and responsibilities in the food safety emergency or crisis response include:



- health
- agriculture and fisheries
- food/feed safety
- local authorities
- domestic reference laboratories
- trade (import/export) authorities
- sectors that liaise with industry, trade and academia.

Advice on how to implement central coordination is discussed in the *FAO/WHO framework for developing national food safety emergency response plans*.

Communication goals remain the same despite the differences of the type of event, the response intensity or the authorities involved. The goals (Principle 1) are to protect consumers' health and foster public trust and confidence in the safety of the food supply.

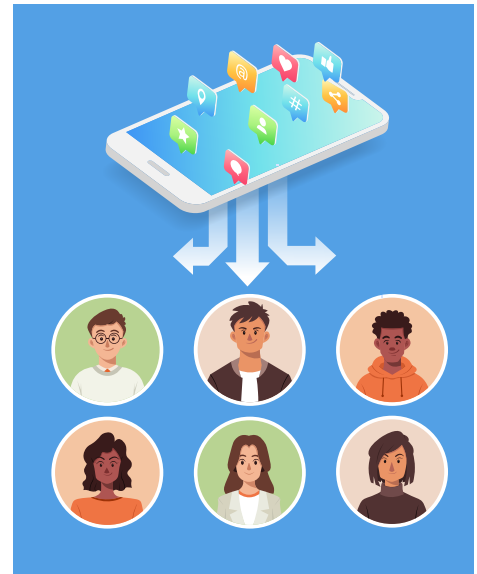
Identification of communication needs of the audience

To best develop and deliver effective messages, it is necessary first to identify the public segments (also called audiences) most vulnerable to a specific event. The research carried out during pre-event phase, i.e., stakeholder engagement, allows anticipation of audience communication needs as they relate to food safety incidents, emergencies or crises.

Understanding different audiences' risk perceptions will also help develop salient communication messages. Everyday risk communication is particularly important in the process of understanding various audiences due to time limitations and pressures during an emergency or crisis. Everyday risk communication contributes significantly to a

competent authority's understanding of the public's diverse sectors and is foundational to communicating during a food safety event (*Guideline on Everyday Food Safety Risk Communication*).

Messages drafted in the pre-event phase should be reviewed and adapted to address current informational needs. These messages may require supplementation as the event develops. Messages are at the heart of communication and this Guideline addresses message content, delivery channels and delivery form.

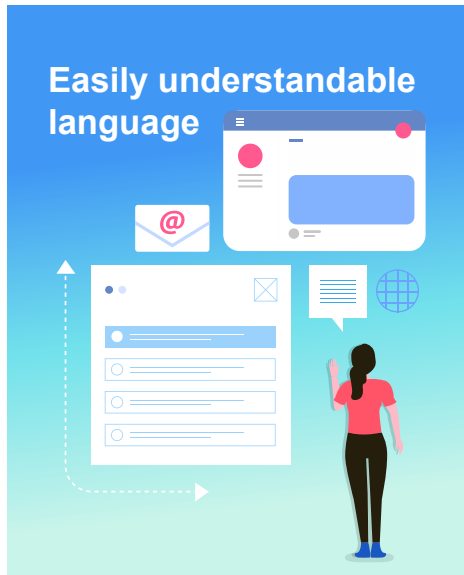


Message content, channels and form

Message content

Message content should be driven by the target audience's informational needs. In its *Crisis + Emergency Risk Communication* (CERC) document, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention points out that different audiences will require different degrees of detail at various times throughout the event. While it is not possible to predict in advance the exact messages needed for a particular event, there

is a predictable progression of informational needs that can be used when drafting or updating messages.



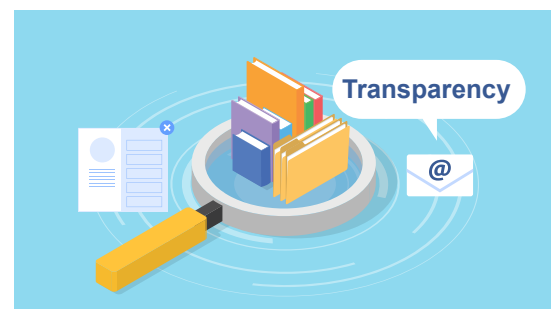
During the initial phases of any food incident, emergency or crisis, competent authorities can use the credibility that was established during the pre-event everyday risk communication situations to garner the public's trust. To maintain that trust, messages should use easily understandable language to explain the risks and ramifications of exposure, how to minimise or avoid exposure, where to go for accurate and updated information, and what food safety regulatory authorities are doing to mitigate the risk. At the beginning of the event, messages are often similar across all sections of the public to meet immediate needs for accurate and timely information. As the event progresses, those who have already received the initial information begin to

look for more details about the ongoing or expanding risks. Messages should then be more targeted to address a particular audience's concerns. People want to know why and how the event happened. So messages need to be more detailed and offer background information on the event as well as information on minimisation and prevention of ongoing or expanding risks.

Message content should empower the targeted audiences to make decisions about risks and risk management. Messages should persuade people to take the preferred actions identified by the competent authority. Those preferred actions may include what to do if associated risks cannot be avoided or what to do to minimise or prevent the identified risks.

As the risk diminishes and the audiences no longer need or want information about the event, messages should promote continued vigilance among the public and transition to educate the public to be prepared for managing similar future risks.

Regardless of where people are along the informational needs continuum, message content must always be transparent. Messages also need to acknowledge and convey uncertainties associated with the food safety event without causing undue alarm or making false promises. Message content should be easily understood



and aim to prevent negative unintended social, nutritional or industry consequences. In summary, the message content must be unambiguous.

Timely and accurate communication messages are required because, in the absence of credible information, rumours can quickly control the public narrative, resulting in misinformation and causing alarm or even panic. This is particularly true when it comes to social media (*Guideline on Using Social Media Engagement for Food Safety Risk Communication*). It is important to develop messages that address uncertainty (Textbox 4). *FSANZ Risk Analysis in Food Regulation*, Section 5.5 offers more discussion on this topic. [↗](#)

Textbox 4

Tips for Communicating Uncertainty

DO:

- Acknowledge uncertainty
- Express empathy.
- Share what you know, do not (yet) know and the process(es) you are using to get answers
- Use consistent message content across all forms and channels

DO NOT:

- Make promises outside of your absolute control
- Use statements of hopelessness or helplessness
- Criticise people for feeling scared or denying there is a risk

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CERC: Psychology of a Crisis. 2019. Page 5-7.

Importantly, messages should also express empathy, which the Oxford Dictionary [↗](#) defines as ‘the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.’ This is done by acknowledging how affected public sectors feel about the incident, emergency or crisis. Empathetic messages acknowledge the fear, anxiety and dread that people may feel (CERC: Psychology of a Crisis. Page 5-7 [↗](#)). Researchers have studied the role of empathy in responses to persuasive risk communication and found that ‘empathy is a key mediator of the suasive effects of health messages.’ (Campbell RG [↗](#), et al. 2004). In some cases, people need to feel that the competent authority cares about their concerns before they will trust the authority’s risk information. The importance of empathy in risk communication is captured by former U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt in the quote below.

“No one cares how much you know, until they know how much you care.” - Theodore Roosevelt

Message channels

The use of effective message channels is required to reach intended audiences. Even the most salient messages will not be effective if they do not reach the targeted audiences. When determining which channels to use, it is important to consider



timeliness and appropriateness for the target audience. It is typically more effective to use existing channels of communication to reach audiences during an event of any intensity rather than use channels with which the audience is not familiar. More than one delivery channel should be used to increase the chance that the messages will be heard, understood and acted upon. Websites, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, TV, radio, newspapers, direct mail, billboards, email and text apps are examples of message delivery channels.

Regardless of how messages are delivered, some or all of them should foster two-way communication between the food safety regulator and the targeted audience (Principle 3). This two-way communication process allows the competent authority to listen to and capture audiences' feedback, monitor audience understanding of the messages, and modify the messages to meet changing communication needs.

The immediacy of the event and audience characteristics will also determine the appropriate message delivery channels. For example, it is unlikely that a printed flyer mailed through the postal service would be a timely way (Principle 2) to communicate risk about a food safety emergency or crisis, as it would be too slow. On the other hand, social media is fast, but if the targeted audience comprises mainly people over 70 years of age, it may be more desirable to communicate via television or radio and the internet.

Message form

The physical form of the message content is dependent on the selected delivery channel. After developing the messages and choosing the appropriate delivery channels, communication messages must be distributed to the targeted audiences. The physical form is also known as 'tactics'. Tactics must be appropriate for the selected delivery channels. Examples of communication tactics include press releases, factsheets, webpage copy, text copy of social media posts, infographics, written statements, videos, Frequently Asked Questions flyers and (internal) talking points for spokespersons.

After these physical materials which contain the messages (content) are developed and approved they then need to be strategically distributed (via channels), thus engaging in risk communication with targeted audiences. The message content, channels and form should be regularly evaluated and modified as needed to ensure that the targeted audiences are receiving, hearing, valuing and acting upon the messages as intended.

● After a food safety event (post-event)

When the targeted audiences no longer need or want information about the event, it is time to move to the post-event phase. It is important to not neglect the post-event phase as it is key to improving the competent authority's FSRC. Resources need to be allocated for this phase, remembering that, in the aftermath of an event, response teams are often physically and mentally exhausted and behind on the projects and work that were put on hold to deal with the event.

This phase is often overlooked because it can be difficult to measure and evaluate FSRC efforts with the public (U.S. FDA [▶](#)). Despite the challenges, the competent authority should evaluate the communication performance, celebrate the successes and identify how to improve in the future. This strategy of self-reflection should result in updating the risk communication plan and strengthening the team's skills.

Debriefing with the response team(s) allows sharing of feedback and additional input from the team. The answers to the questions (Textbox 5) asked in the debriefing sessions will improve the FSRC plan and the competent authority's future responses and form part of monitoring and review (*Guideline on Monitoring and Review of Competent Authority's Food Safety Risk Communication System*).

Textbox 5

Debriefing Questions:

- Did the targeted audiences receive our messages?
- Did they understand them? If they understood them, did they find the messages of value in reducing risk and anxiety?
- Did the targeted audiences act upon the information that was provided to minimise food safety risk?
- How well did we maintain the public's trust in us?
- Do we need to rebuild or repair the public's trust in us?
- Did we effectively and efficiently coordinate with other agencies and within our own agency? What worked well and how can we improve inter- and intra-agency coordination?

● Conclusion

This Guideline presents a linear view of the before, during and after phases of a food safety event. However, in practice, events change quickly, and it is possible to move back and forth between the phases before finally moving through to the post-event phase and returning to daily operations and the pre-event communication response phase.

This Guideline also recognises that APEC member economies are in different planning and preparedness stages for a food safety event. As such, the document has provided response guidelines that competent authorities can use to further improve preparedness levels for events of varying intensity and impact on public health. The documents cited throughout the Framework and this Guideline provide crisis communication planning resources. Additionally, resources from the FAO and WHO and the International Food Information Council include communication tools and templates that can be adapted to different preparedness levels and events. Finally, central coordination should be applied to the FSRC process during an emergency or crisis.

● Acknowledgment

The preparation of the *Guideline on Food Safety Risk Communication During a Food Safety Incident, Emergency or Crisis* was led by Hong Jin of Food Standards Australia New Zealand and Amy Philpott of Watson Green LLC. Contributions to the preparation of this Guideline were received from Jinjing Zhang (State Administration of Market Regulation, People's Republic of China) and Yang Jiao (General Administration of Customs, People's Republic of China); Marcelo Valverde (Ministry of Foreign Trade and Tourism, Peru); Jun Cheng (Singapore Food Agency), Jarunee Intrasuk (Ministry of Public Health, Thailand), Megan Crowe (U.S. Department of Commerce), YiFan Jiang and Rachel Wong (Food Industry Asia), Eleonora Dupouy (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), and Simone Moraes Raszl (World Health Organization).

• Further Reading



Canadian Food Inspection Agency (2021) Food incident response process



The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2019) CERC: Psychology of a Crisis



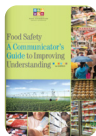
The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2018) CERC: Introduction



The U.S. FDA (2017) FDA Strategic Plan for Risk Communication and Health Literacy 2017-2019



FAO/WHO (2016) Risk Communication Applied to Food Safety Handbook



International Food Information Council (2015) Food safety: a communicator's guide to improving understanding



Heads of European Food Safety Agencies (2015) Guidelines for Management and Communications during Food and Feed Safety Incidents



Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China (2011) 国家食品安全事故应急预案 National emergency plan for food safety incidents

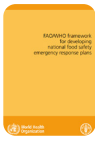


FAO/WHO (2011) FAO/WHO Guide for Application of Risk Analysis Principles and Procedures During Food Safety Emergencies



Food Standards Australia and New Zealand (2011) Australia's National Food Incident Response Protocol





FAO/WHO (2010) FAO/WHO framework for developing national food safety emergency response plans



Food Standards Australia and New Zealand (2008) Strawberry tampering incident



Health Canada (2008) Lessons Learned Health Canada's Response to the 2008 Listeriosis Outbreak Executive Summary



FAO (1998) The application of risk communication to food standards and safety matters



International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN) various publications on food safety risk communication (use the search term "risk communication")

