

If it's hard to say, it must be risky

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We all have different criteria for what we consider risky. However, numerous studies have suggested that we tend to perceive familiar products and activities as being less risky and hazardous than unfamiliar ones.

If something is familiar, the thinking goes, it is comfortable and safe. But how do we know if something is familiar? We often rely on a simple shortcut: If it is easy to perceive, remember or pronounce, we have probably seen it before. If so, will a product's name and how easy it is to pronounce, affect how we view the product? Will it seem safer when its name is easy to pronounce? In a new study reported in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, psychologists Hyunjin Song and Norbert Schwarz from the University of Michigan present evidence that if we have problems pronouncing something, we will consider it to be risky.

A group of students were given a list of made-up food additives and were asked to rate how harmful they were. The additives all contained twelve letters, with Magnalroxate being one of the easiest to pronounce and Hnegripitrom one of the hardest to pronounce. The students rated the difficult to pronounce additives as being more harmful. In addition, the hard to pronounce additives were considered to be more novel than those with easier names. In another experiment, students were shown a list of made-up names of amusement-park rides and were asked to rate the rides on how adventurous they would be and how risky (and therefore most likely to make them sick) the rides would be. The names ranged from being easy to pronounce (such as Chunta) to very difficult

to pronounce (such as Vaiveahtoishi). Consistent with the first experiment, the students rated the rides with the difficult to pronounce names as being more risky, but also more exciting.

These results show that people consistently classify difficult to pronounce items as risky, and this is the case for both undesirable risks (such as getting sick on a roller coaster or hazardous food additive) as well as desirable risks (such as an adventurous amusement park ride). These findings also suggest that risk perception may be influenced by the way the items are presented - if they are difficult to process (such as hard to pronounce names), they will be viewed as being inherently riskier. The authors note that these findings are relevant for risk communication and they suggest that difficult product names "may alert consumers to the risks posed by potentially hazardous products, possibly motivating them to pay closer attention to warnings and instructions."

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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