

# Study finds many consumers ignore food product recalls

April 14 2009

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Rutgers' Food Policy Institute (FPI) released a study today showing that many Americans fail to check their homes for recalled food products. Only about 60 percent of the studied sample reported ever having looked for recalled food in their homes, and only 10 percent said they had ever found a recalled food product.

The study was based on a survey of 1,101 Americans interviewed by telephone from Aug. 4 to Sept. 24, 2008.

Most respondents said they pay a great deal of attention to [food](#) recalls and, when they learn about them, tell many other people. But 40 percent of these consumers think that the foods they purchase are less likely to be recalled than those purchased by others, appearing to believe that food recalls just don't apply to them.

Despite widespread awareness of recent foodborne illness outbreaks and a sense that the number of food recalls is increasing, about half of Americans say that food recalls have had no impact on their lives, said psychologist William K. Hallman, a professor of human ecology at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, School of Environmental and Biological Sciences. "Getting consumers to pay attention to news about recalls isn't the hard part," he said. "It's getting them to take the step of actually looking for recalled food products in their homes." Hallman is also the director of FPI and lead author of the study report.

The Rutgers researchers also offered suggestions about how to improve

communications about food recalls. Nearly 75 percent of those surveyed said they would like to receive personalized information about recalls on their receipt at the grocery store, and more than 60 percent said they also would also like to receive such information through a letter or an e-mail.

Hallman said that personalizing communications about food recalls may be the way to overcome the sense that the messages are meant for someone else. Providing consumers with recall information about specific products they have purchased makes it harder for them to ignore the advice to look for the recalled items.

But even when people find recalled food, not all do what they are told. Approximately 12 percent reported eating a food they thought had been recalled. [0]At the other extreme, some consumers take a "better safe than sorry" attitude. More than 25 percent reported that they had simply discarded food products after hearing about a recall, potentially wasting safe, nutritious food. Many consumers also avoid purchasing products not included in the recall but which are similar, or are from the same manufacturer.

"Our research also points out that instructions to consumers must be clear and comprehensible if you want them to act appropriately after a food recall," Hallman said. He cites the Food and Drug Administration's recent advice to consumers not to eat pistachios, but to hold onto them and not throw them away as confusing to [consumers](#).

"We found that clear, direct messages such as 'throw the food in the garbage' or 'return the food to the store for a refund,' should motivate action. Keeping people in a holding pattern is more likely to result in inaction, and it certainly increases the likelihood that someone might eat the food by accident."

The authors of the study are William K. Hallman and Cara L. Cuite,

researchers at FPI, and Neal H. Hooker, a researcher at the Ohio State University. The study was funded by the United States Department of Agriculture and the Grocery Manufacturers Association.

An earlier report based on data from the same survey provided insight into consumer awareness of the Salmonella Saintpaul advisory in the summer of 2008. The report is also available at [www.foodpolicy.rutgers.edu](http://www.foodpolicy.rutgers.edu).

FPI is a research unit of Rutgers' New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station. The institute addresses important emerging food policy issues and supports public and private decision makers who shape aspects of the food system within which government, agriculture, industry and the consumer interact.

More information: The study can be downloaded at [www.foodpolicy.rutgers.edu](http://www.foodpolicy.rutgers.edu).

Source: Rutgers University ([news](#) : [web](#))

Citation: Study finds many consumers ignore food product recalls (2009, April 14) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-04-consumers-food-product-recalls.html>

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