

Health risks were not consumers' first concern over horse meat contamination, study finds

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Days after the initial announcement by the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) on the 15th January that horse and pig DNA were found in beef burgers, researchers conducted an online consumer study, as part of the EU-funded project FoodRisC. This [study](#) took place before the latest developments about the widespread presence of horsemeat in certain beef products within some European countries.

Results showed that [consumers](#) were mainly concerned that the claims on labels did not match the contents of the products. There was very little evidence of concern about [health risks](#) – although some wondered how government assurances about safety could be so conclusive given that the discovery of [horsemeat](#) was completely unexpected.

There were a lot of questions about the testing process. Consumers wanted to know whether the tests were routine and if not, what prompted them.

"How often are these tests actually run? Is it possible the horse and pig meat had been going in to the burgers for a very long time till it was discovered?" said one 33-year-old UK female from the study.

Even at this early stage, several consumers asked whether it might be the case that beef products other than burgers might be affected. Many asked how the contamination could have occurred and for how long the

situation had been going on. There were a number of questions about what would happen to all the burgers that were withdrawn from [supermarkets](#).

Consumers wanted to know who would be held accountable and what would be done in the future to prevent such contamination happening again.

To conduct the study, researchers from Brunel University and University College Dublin used Vizzata, an [online tool](#) that enabled them to collect data very soon after the first announcement by FSAI, about consumers' main concerns and their questions. Twenty two consumers from the UK and twenty two from the Republic of Ireland, all meat eaters who shopped in at least one of the affected retailers, left a total of 292 questions and comments in the study which started on the 19th January and finished on the 27th January.

"Using Vizzata provided us with an opportunity to learn at a very early stage what sense consumers made of official communications from key agencies", said Julie Barnett who leads the study and is Professor in Health Research at Brunel University.

"Uniquely it allowed us to identify exactly what questions consumers were asking. This provides important evidence at a very [early stage](#) of what, for some institutions at least, is a crisis. It is vital to be responsive to consumer views and, where possible, to monitor how these change over time as new issues arise. Vizzata helps us to do this."

To read a summary of the study called 'Consumer perceptions of the horse meat burger incident' [follow this link](#). A paper will be submitted for peer-review publication.

Source: FoodRisC project

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