

Consumers' response to food safety risks are altered due to prior commitment and preference

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With the globalization of our food supply, food safety issues are a major concern for both public health and for the food industry. Media and industry warn consumers of major recalls and problems with food items, but do consumers listen? In a new article published in the *Canadian Journal of Agricultural Economics*, researcher Jessica Cao, together with David Just, Calum Turvey, and Brian Wansink of Cornell University, demonstrated that consumers are reluctant to respond to food safety risks if the recommendations interfere with their existing habits. The study tested whether individuals respond to food risks in their favorite products the same way they do with less preferred products.

116 participants were asked to bid on three different flavors of chocolate bars: plain, almond, or peanut. One group was allowed to choose their favorite initially, while another was randomly assigned one of the bars. After bidding, food safety risks regarding two of the flavors were given to the participants who were then allowed to adjust their bids. They were given information about a food-borne toxin that is heavily associated with peanuts, and only slightly associated with almonds

Participants who had freely picked a flavor tended not to reduce their willingness to pay after being told of the [food safety](#) risks relative to those who were randomly assigned a bar. Before risk information was given, participants were willing to pay up to 24 cents for the peanut flavor. After the risk information was given, they were willing to pay

close to 38 cents more—a 58% increase. "Consumers are selective in their understanding. If a warning doesn't agree with their beliefs, it will probably be ignored," says Jessica Cao, Assistant Professor at the University of Guelph, one of the primary researchers for the study.

Participants who chose their favorite bar were also less likely to change their perception of risk when given relevant information. After learning the risks, those who were assigned the bars increased their risk perception by more than 60%, whereas those that selected their favorite bar increased risk perception by just over 30%.

This study shows that risk information alone is not enough to get [consumers](#) to change their behavior. Turvey concluded that, "It is important to realize that anyone can get sick from a food borne illness. When information about risks to your health from eating a particular food comes out, check any items you have bought and respond accordingly."

Provided by Cornell Food & Brand Lab

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