

# Social norms may increase consumption of risky food

June 17 2020

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Who can make you eat pink hamburgers or uncooked chicken? Your future parents-in-law, research shows.

Even though you know and feel that eating certain [food](#) is risky, the [social norms](#) governing the eating situation may make you eat it anyway.

Social norms, such as the expectation to be polite and consume the food offered to you at a garden party, may work as a force that overrides your fears of being sick.

In a newly published study, Nina Veflen professor at BI Norwegian Business School and senior scientist in Nofima, together with her coauthors from Zurich University and Nofima, found that the risk perception and social norms are counteracting forces that influence consumption of risky food—such as pink hamburgers, not well-done chicken, and moldy bread.

## Parents-in-law: Number one cause of high-pressure eating

The researchers conducted three studies. In the first study, they investigated how norm strength, measured in terms of perceived pressure to comply with a particular social norm varies between different social situations, such as being a guest, eating at home or at a restaurant. They found that norm strength depended on a set of situational characteristics.

Among these, expected sanctions if you fail to follow the social norm and empathy with the person(s) in the host role of the social situation had the strongest effects.

Of all the 17 situations evaluated, being invited to one's future parents-in-law for the first time was the situation with the highest perceived pressure to comply with the social norm. The consequences of not eating the food we are served are judged as severe and the situation in general as unfamiliar and unpleasant.

"We might imagine that in this situation the anticipated cost of eating something disliked was weighed against the anticipated cost of being judged impolite, rude, or—in the worst case—as an unsuitable son or daughter-in-law," explains Nina Veflen.

## **Empathy makes us eat**

Another situation with very high social pressure was the scenario of an enthusiastic 13-year-old daughter serving a dish she had made herself. In this situation, our feelings of empathy were decisive. At the other end of the scale, eating something we dislike is most unlikely when we are home alone, a situation that is felt pleasant and familiar, with no one to witness and no serious social consequences.

Next, the scientists investigated how willingness to eat 15 different foods (varying from moldy to fresh bread and from rare to well-done hamburgers) related to perceived risk in situations characterized by low and high social pressure. They found that people were more willing to accept the offered food, including food they think is unsafe, in a situation with high social pressure.

"I find it interesting that even something as disgusting as moldy bread is more likely to be eaten in a high pressure situation, such as when you

meet your parents in law for the first time" continues the researcher.

Finally, they tested the simultaneous effects of social norms and risk perception on risk-taking. They found that fear of getting ill from food and social norms exert simultaneous counteracting effects on the likelihood of eating risky foods. In practice, this means that when people may refuse food they think is risky when served at a restaurant, they may be willing to eat it in situations with high social pressure, such as in the first visit to your future parents-in-law.

## Just say no

These findings are novel and has implications for the design of food safety messages to consumers. Informing or scaring people will not always make them avoid risky foods, as social [pressure](#) may be a stronger force in some situations. Therefore, we need interventions that weaken the social norms governing the situation.

"We need to develop food safety interventions that change norm strength and/or reduce norm compliance to influence consumers' risk-taking. Put differently, we have to make it easier for people to just say no to something they would prefer not to eat," adds Nina Veflen.

**More information:** Nina Veflen et al. Situated Food Safety Risk and the Influence of Social Norms, *Risk Analysis* (2020). [DOI: 10.1111/risa.13449](#)

Provided by Nofima

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