

Risk Communication during a Foodborne Outbreak Investigation

Abstract

Effective risk communication is a critical component of foodborne illness outbreak investigations, supporting public health protection, informed decision-making, and confidence in regulatory institutions. As food safety events increasingly unfold within a complex and rapidly evolving information environment, communicators must navigate challenges including declining public trust, media fragmentation, and the growing influence of misinformation and disinformation.

This presentation examines the principles and practices of risk communication during foodborne illness outbreak investigations, drawing on the experience of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) and Canada's multi-jurisdictional outbreak response framework. Key risk communication principles, including transparency, timeliness, accuracy, and audience-centred messaging, will be explored. The presentation will demonstrate how these principles inform communication strategies before, during, and after food safety incidents to protect public health and maintain stakeholder confidence.

The presentation will also examine communication structures and coordination mechanisms used during multi-jurisdictional foodborne illness outbreaks, including the roles of the Outbreak Investigation Coordinating Committee (OICC) and the Outbreak Communications Team (OCT). Through practical examples and lessons learned, it will highlight the importance of clear, coordinated, and actionable communications in supporting public understanding, encouraging protective behaviours, and strengthening outbreak response outcomes. The discussion will also consider the broader application of these approaches within food safety, public health, and One Health communication contexts.