

Target group-oriented risk communication on food supplements

BfR Project Description, 8 May 2009

In recent years the Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) has voiced its opinion on the subject of food supplements on several occasions. Up to now, BfR's risk communication has mainly been oriented towards the health assessment of the ingredients in certain groups of food supplements and was intended mainly for the interested public at large. Its press releases reported on a new BfR assessment of the risks and benefits of vitamins and minerals in food, provided basic information on the subject of food supplements, pointed out that highly dosed vitamin products are not food supplements or advised against the consumption of kava-kava or ephedra-containing products. Furthermore, the Federal Institute for Drugs and Medical Devices (BfArM) and BfR jointly warned against the purchase of muscle-building products. Some of these products contain anabolic agents that are not listed as ingredients.

The latest research findings on risk communication come to the conclusion that it must be oriented more towards target groups in order to convey the "messages" more successfully and with a lasting impact. Against the backdrop of possible health impairments which may be linked to the uncontrolled intake of food supplements and the steady increase in the product range of food supplements, BfR believes there is an urgent need for risk communication that is oriented more towards target groups.

Project management agency

BfR

Department: Risk Communication

Unit: Risk research, perception, early detection, impact assessment

Co-operation partners

KATALYSE Institut (www.katalyse.de)

GfK HealthCare Nuremberg (www.gfk.com)

Project term

09/2008-05/2010

Funding agency and amount of support

BfR

The main aim of the project launched in September 2008 is to use target group-oriented risk communication to inform more people more effectively about the potential health risks associated with the consumption of food supplements. One of the major components of this task is to establish which target groups are to be identified and whether they are to be defined on the basis of product groups used, fields of application or everyday use of language. The project remit also encompasses examination of how target groups can be reached most effectively, e.g. via print media, TV, flyers (via pharmacies, schools, sports centres), training programmes.

Furthermore, consumers are to be placed in a position where they can grasp the difference between food supplements and medicinal products. Medicinal products which are sold in a similar market segment to food supplements go through a state marketing authorisation procedure and are, therefore, tested for quality, efficacy and safety - unlike food

supplements. Before purchasing food supplements, consumers should keep this critical point in mind. Furthermore, the aspect of misleading consumers is to be another focus of the project because of the non-proven efficacy of food supplements.

Conduct

1. Analysis of the current situation

Previous risk communication work on the subject of food supplements is to be reviewed and assessed from the angle of its orientation towards target groups. The available information is also to be critically examined or compared with the manufacturers' recommended user groups for specific products like the groups listed for instance in the Food Supplements List 2007. In this context a wide range of known food supplements is to be considered. Further findings are expected from the evaluation of the results of the National Food Consumption Study II and the data from the household panel of the company for consumption, market and sales research in Munich (GfK).

2. Focus groups

With the help of focus groups the goal is to establish what the users think food supplement products are, whether they perceive any potential risks that may be linked to the taking of various food supplements and how they deal with them. What's more, the project is to examine whether users are familiar with the difference between food supplements and medicinal products as they are placed on the shelves beside each other for instance in pharmacies. Furthermore, the focus groups serve as a discussion forum. Discussions focus on questions about motivation, consumption and information behaviour, information wishes and users' risk perception of food supplements.

3. Representative survey

The carrying out of surveys and the evaluation of the data from representative surveys are expected to offer greater insight into the characterisation of product groups for effective risk communication.

4. Target group analysis

Within the framework of the project different target groups are to be defined for the purposes of more effective risk communication on food supplements. The target group analysis includes findings from the analysis of the current situation, the focus groups and the representative survey. It will provide information on the characteristic features of the target groups which decide to take specific products or product groups.

5. Target group-oriented communication concepts

Based on the findings of the target group analysis, the requirements for different communication concepts are to be established and criteria developed. Concrete communication concepts and measures are to be developed for three target groups and implemented using example cases.