

The Federal Institute of Risk Assessment at a glance – dates, facts and background

BfR-Background information, 1 Juli 2017

Does aluminium in antiperspirants or arsenic in rice cause a health risk? What is a possible reason for the lower number of antibiotic-resistant germs in foods? The Federal Institute for Risk Assessment - in short the BfR - is responsible for questions to do with the health assessment of food, consumer articles and chemicals. In its work it makes an important contribution to rendering food, products and chemical use safer in Germany.

The BfR was established on 1 November 2002 to strengthen consumer health protection whose credibility had suffered as a consequence of the BSE crisis. This explains why the legislator wrote into the Act establishing the BfR that it enjoys independence in its scientific assessments. The main task of the BfR is to voice an opinion on the potential risks from food, consumer articles and chemicals, and to offer scientific advice to the federal ministries for their policy decisions. Given the Institute's remit, the main ministries involved are:

- The Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL) (food and product safety)
- The Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Building and Nuclear Safety (BMUB) (chemicals safety and contaminants in food)
- The Federal Ministry of Transport and Digital Infrastructure (BMVI) (transport of dangerous goods, ballast water agreement)

In our globalised world it is important for the institutions involved in consumer health protection to be part of an international network. The BfR cooperates with a number of national and international, governmental and non-governmental agencies (FAO, WHO, OECD, etc.). It is the national Focal Point of the European Food Safety Agency (EFSA) and a partner of the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA).

Goals of the BfR

The BfR sees itself as the advocate of consumer health protection in a context in which many stakeholders make their voices heard. Based on its risk assessments, it seeks to strengthen consumer health protection. To this end, the Institute offers policy advice, participates in national and international agencies and disseminates consumer information. One important component in its risk assessment activities is risk communication and the various forms it can take. Ensuring throughout that its risk communication is tailored to specific target groups, the BfR implements these forms of risk communication by means of various projects and events.

BfR assessment of health risks

The focus of its health assessments is on people as consumers.

Whenever control authorities detect microbial contamination or high levels of harmful toxicological ingredients, heavy metals or pesticides in foods, consumer products or cosmetics, the BfR's scientific assessment expertise is in demand. In their health assessments the Institute's scientists assume the important task of establishing how germs or substances reach a food or product, whether they constitute a risk to humans and what action should then be taken. They adopt a science-based research approach and draw on exposure assessment and toxicological methods.

The three main areas of the BfR's work - food safety, product safety and chemicals safety - encompass a wide range of topics. The BfR is the Institute to contact on

- Questions about the biological safety of foods and zoonoses (these are pathogens like *Salmonella* which can cross from animals to humans), research on them, their routes of transmission and spread
- Questions about microbial toxins, for instance in mussels or the antibiotic resistances of germs
- Questions about hygiene in the food sector
- Questions about food ingredients like, for instance, coumarin in cinnamon or the formation of benzene in carrot juice (food toxicology)
- Questions about nutrition risks for instance from food supplements, allergies and functional foods like plant sterols in spreadable fat products to lower cholesterol levels
- Questions about genetically modified foods
- Questions about the contamination of foods with environmental toxins like dioxins, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) or polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs)
- Questions about feed safety
- Questions about pesticides and biocides
- Questions about intoxications
- Questions about the safe transport of toxic substances
- Questions about nanotechnology in food, consumer products and cosmetics
- Questions about the safety of cosmetics, textiles, toys, water pipes, food packaging and other consumer products
- Questions about alternative methods to animal experiments

Advice for the BfR from external expert panels

The BfR receives advice from 15 national panels of experts. At least ten members are appointed to each BfR Committee, acting as independent external experts who input their expertise into the Institute's work on a voluntary basis. The task of the committees consists in providing advice to the BfR on conceptual and methodological issues and also with regard to external scientific quality assurance. With its committees, the BfR integrates external knowledge which can be useful for its assessment activities and which therefore increases the scientific quality of BfR opinions. In addition, the institute's committees enable the BfR to obtain external expertise at short notice in crisis situations.

In the wake of the new appointment of the Committees, a newly set-up BfR Committee for Risk Research and Risk Perception started its activities in 2011.

This expert network gives the BfR access to expertise on the highest scientific level for its risk assessments.

This raises the scientific standard of its expert opinions and guarantees external quality assurance. Furthermore, the Institute is also in a position to seek external advice at very short notice in the event of crisis.

The decisions of the Committees are of an advisory character for the BfR. The external independent experts advise the BfR on scientific questions but are not involved in the assessment work of the BfR; neither do they make official decisions.

National Breastfeeding Committee at the BfR

The main remit of the National Breastfeeding Committee is to promote breastfeeding in the Federal Republic of Germany.

German Centre for the Protection of Laboratory Animals (Bf3R)

The BfR performs the role of the "German Centre for the Protection of Laboratory Animals (Bf3R)" and coordinates all associated activities nationwide with the goal of reducing animal experiments to the necessary minimum and providing the best possible protection for laboratory animals. Furthermore, national and international research activities and a scientific dialogue shall be encouraged by the work of the Centre.

BfR risk communication

The BfR informs the general public about potential, identified and assessed risks. Here the Institute believes it is imperative to ensure that the assessment process and the foundations for assessment are as transparent and comprehensible as possible. The BfR opinions are intended for all social stakeholders who play a relevant role in consumer health protection: federal and regional ministries, public authorities on the municipal, regional and federal level, consumer associations and other interested bodies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), scientific institutions, national and international bodies and organisations, the business community, professional bodies and the media. Besides the media, consumer advice centres, *Stiftung Warentest* (test institution for consumer goods) and the *Infodienst Verbraucherschutz, Ernährung, Landwirtschaft* (information service on consumer protection, food and agriculture (aid)) are important multipliers when it comes to informing the public at large.

BfR risk communication is an ongoing, interactive process. A conscious effort is made to involve the various stakeholders in order to sound out the different interests and levels of knowledge more easily. To this end, the BfR regularly stages expert meetings, scientific symposia, stakeholder fora, hearings or consumer fora. The active dialogue with target groups is an integral part of the BfR strategy to strengthen consumer health protection.

The BfR is independent in the communication of its assessments. One of the aims of the BfR is also to act as a source of scientific reference and orientation with regard to unresolved issues and in the event of crises.

Three BfR locations in Berlin

The BfR is based in Berlin where it has three locations. Its main location is in Berlin-Jungfernheide; the President's office and another modern institute building are situated in the Berlin district of Marienfelde. There are long-term plans to consolidate the locations at this site in Marienfelde.

The large institute building in Marienfelde is equipped with state-of-the-art analytical and microbiological laboratories. The Institute also has its own unit for breeding experimental animals, isolation sheds for experimental animals, facilities for the keeping and slaughter of animals and food technology. Furthermore, it boasts meeting rooms with state-of-the-art communication technology and an auditorium with more than 400 seats in which numerous hearings, meetings, symposia and congresses are staged every year.

Research within the BfR

The BfR has the statutory remit to carry out research that is closely linked to its main areas of work and activities and which is necessary for the pursuit of its statutory tasks. In this way, the Institute secures and promotes scientific expertise for the purposes of internationally recognised risk assessments that are not influenced by economic interests. The research is financed solely from public funds and funding from the European Commission. The Institute does not seek private third-party funding to ensure it retains its economic, political and social neutrality.

The BfR attaches great importance to national and international networking. Besides its co-operation with international organisations, the BfR also cooperates on research activities with universities and scientific organisations through national and international research networks, the staging of joint EU research projects and the exchange of scientific expertise.

With a view to strengthening food safety in the new accession states, the BfR plays an active role in twinning projects. In this way it contributes to improving food safety in Europe.

EFSA Focal Point

In its capacity as the national Focal Point, the BfR coordinates the exchange of scientific information between the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), the authorities responsible for food and feed safety in Germany and stakeholders from the business community, political circles, the sciences and consumer associations. The BfR was proposed for this task by the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL). National Focal Points have been set up in all 28 Member States of the European Union (EU). They are the interface between the individual Member States and EFSA. In this way, risk assessment activities in the individual Member States are to be coordinated on the European level. The goal is to pool European expertise on the health risks associated with foods and to place food safety in Europe on the highest possible scientific level.

15 years of the BfR - A stocktaking

Thanks to the high standard of its work, its scientific independence and its transparent assessments, the Institute has become a recognised player and important driver of consumer health protection on the national and international stage. Consumers know they can trust its judgements.

BfR Telegram

About the BfR

The Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) is a scientifically independent institution within the portfolio of the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL) in Germany. It advises the Federal Government and Federal Laender on questions of food, chemical and product safety. The BfR conducts its own research on topics that are closely linked to its assessment tasks.

Foundation

1 November 2002 as a body under public law within the portfolio of the Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture (BMEL). The BfR has been certified in accordance with ISO 9001 since 2010.

Location

3 locations in Berlin

Main location: Max-Dohrn-Straße 8-10, 10589 Berlin (Jungfernheide)

President's office: Alt-Marienfelde 17-21
Additional Institute building: Diederdsdorfer Weg 1

Human resources

In 2016 the BfR staff comprised a total of 855 employees, including 345 scientists and 20 trainees.

Budget

For its statutory tasks, the BfR was allocated funds in 2015 amounting to €88 million
including third-party funding secured by it €3.7 million

Objective

To strengthen consumer health protection in Germany and on the international level

Main areas of work

The main areas of work laid down in the "Act restructuring consumer health protection and food safety" of 14 August 2002 encompass the

- health assessment of biological and material-chemical safety of food,
- health assessment of the safety of substances (chemicals, pesticides, biocides) and selected products (consumer articles, cosmetics, tobacco products, textiles and food packaging),
- risk assessment of genetically modified organisms in food, feed, plants and animals,
- risk communication and
- the development and validation of alternative methods to animal experiments.

Risk assessments

In 2016 the BfR issued approximately 3000 scientific opinions.

Research

In 2016 the BfR was involved in 20 EU projects and 30 projects of the German Research Society (DFG) and other federal agencies.

Panel work

In 2016 BfR employees served on 424 national and international panels.

The following are attached to the BfR:

National Reference Laboratories (NRL)

19 NRLs from the fields of food safety, genetically modified organisms, food hygiene, zoonotic agents and antibiotics resistance monitoring and the Senior Expert Office for the Import Control of Wine.

Federal Bureau for Good Laboratory Practices (GLP)

Responsible for the national and international coordination and harmonisation of GLP-relevant questions and for the monitoring of GLP test institutes inside and outside Germany

German Centre for the Protection of Laboratory Animals (Bf3R)

The BfR performs the role of the "German Centre for the Protection of Laboratory Animals (Bf3R)" and coordinates all associated activities nationwide with the goal of reducing animal experiments to the necessary minimum and providing the best possible protection for laboratory animals.

BfR Committees

15 Committees advise the Institute. In Germany they draw together the available expertise and then input it into international panels. This guarantees rapid access to an expert network not just during a crisis.

National Breastfeeding Committee

Its task is to promote breastfeeding in Germany.

EFSA Focal Point

Its task is to coordinate the exchange of scientific information between the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), the public institutions responsible for food and feed safety in Germany and stakeholders from the business community, science and consumer