Writing about Health Risks: A Handbook for Journalists

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Reporting about health risks isn't easy. It involves an understanding of the complexities of risk assessment, an ability to distinguish between scientific and pseudoscientific information, the capacity to evaluate and digest complicated material, and the communication skills to portray the risk in the proper context. Simplistic or contradictory messages can leave readers confused and wary; they "tune out" and you lose your audience.

The aim of this handbook is to facilitate the process of reporting by offering a practical, step-by-step approach to writing about health risks. It is written from the perspectives of a toxicologist concerned about the consequences of misinforming the public e.g., ineffective actions to protect and improve personal and/or public health and an equally concerned medical journalist who understands the pressures of producing accurate, balanced stories on tight deadlines.

We provide questions to ask during the development of the story, tools for evaluating the evidence, an annotated glossary of scientific terms relevant to risk assessment, specific examples from real-world risk stories, and advice on how to avoid common pitfalls. These suggestions are intended to streamline the process of writing accurate, balanced risk stories with the knowledge that clear "take-home" messages will assist readers in making reasonable decisions about their health.


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