



## *Just the Facts...*

## **Health Risk Communication**

### ***WHAT IS RISK COMMUNICATION?***

Risk communication is the exchange of information between interested stakeholders such as commanders or deploying personnel about the nature, magnitude, significance, and/or control of health risks during deployment. It is the two-way dialogue of information and/or opinions concerning a risk or perceived risk to soldiers, individuals, or community groups. Typically, a risk communication program is employed during any low-trust or high-concern situation such as before, during, or after deployment.

### ***MISSION***

The mission of the USACHPPM Health Risk Communication Office is the development of the risk communication skills throughout the U.S. Army and where applicable throughout the Department of Defense by:

- Providing risk communication expertise, training, and document review.
- Delivering consultation senior leadership.
- Disseminating risk communication publications.
- Responding to emergency and crisis situations.

It is very important for the communicator to speak and act with integrity and to believe in the message. Effective communication is a necessary skill that all environmental and health professionals must possess when conveying technical information to a non-technical, anxious, or frightened audience. Although working in low-trust, high-concern, sensitive and controversial situations may sometimes be overwhelming, understanding the principles of risk communication and being well prepared can make the task much easier.

### ***GUIDELINES***

The effectiveness of any risk communication program relies on the communicator's responsibility to:

- Develop key messages
- Know the audience
- Be prepared
- Believe in the topic

Several facets of risk communication should be considered to ensure the effective exchange of health risk information. The following is a set of guidelines for communicating effectively to the intended audience.

Simplify language and presentation, not content:	<p>When trying to communicate the complex issues behind a health risk, it is easy to leave out information that seems to be overly technical. Risk communication research and studies have proven that all audience members can understand any technical subject if it is presented properly.</p> <p>This can be done, for example, through the use of visuals and diagrams and by defining all technical/medical/scientific jargon and acronyms.</p>
Be objective, not subjective:	<p>It is often very easy to differentiate between opinions and facts. It can be difficult however, to respond credibly to opinions without substantiating them or offending the individual asking the question.</p> <p>In order to maintain credibility, respond to both opinions and facts in the same manner.</p>
Communicate clearly and honestly:	<p>To communicate clearly, present information at the audience's level of understanding. People can reject information that is too difficult for them or they can reject a communicator who is perceived to be dishonest or untrustworthy. As a result, they may refuse to acknowledge the information or become hostile. On the other hand, they may become hostile if they feel patronized. The bottom line is – know the audience!</p> <p>In addition, whenever possible, provide familiar examples and concrete information that can help put the risk in perspective.</p>
Deal with uncertainty:	<p>When communicating health risks, results are not definitive.</p> <p>Discuss sources of uncertainty, such as how the data were gathered, how they were analyzed, and how the results were interpreted. This demonstrates that the uncertainties are recognized, which can lead to an increase in trust and credibility. However, when discussing uncertainty, the communicator should stress his/her expertise and knowledge of the subject. This will reinforce the leadership's ability to handle the situation and could allay concerns and fears regarding the risk and the risk-management decision.</p>
Be cautious when using risk comparisons:	<p>In order to put risks in perspective, comparing an unfamiliar risk to a familiar one can be helpful. However, some types of comparisons can alienate audience members.</p> <p>Avoid comparing unrelated risks, such as the risks associated with smoking versus those associated with air contamination. People rarely accept the comparison of unrelated risks.</p>
Develop key messages:	<p>Key messages are those items of importance, the health risk information that needs to be communicated. They must be clear, concise, and to-the-point.</p> <p>No more than three messages should be communicated at one time. Repeat key messages as often as possible to ensure they are not misunderstood or misinterpreted.</p>
Be prepared:	<p>When either presenting health risk information or answering questions regarding an individual's concerns, be prepared. Most questions and concerns can be anticipated if the audience is known. In fact, the communicator should know 70 percent of the possible questions that could be asked. Consider how to answer general questions and how to respond to specific inquiries.</p>

## ***SERVICES***

A variety of services are available from the Health Risk Communication Office including training, consultation, and document review. Training workshops are offered throughout the year in different parts of the country, as well as overseas upon request. Basic and Advanced Risk Communication Workshops are offered regularly, and specialized training classes may also be scheduled. The Risk Communication team is also available for consultation. These consultations may include support in the following areas: preparation for public meetings and stakeholder open houses, development of a Community Relations strategy and plan, review of stakeholder interaction materials, establishment and support to Restoration Advisory Boards, preparation for Congressional hearings, assistance in dealing with negative media and media relations, assistance in dealing with negotiations with regulators, and communication assistance in crisis situations. The effectiveness of risk communication relies on the ability to build and maintain relationships at all levels.