

Lay inferences about adventitious agents

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Adventitious agents are but one of the many risks that laypeople might encounter and be forced to evaluate. Because they cannot be experts in everything, laypeople must draw on their general knowledge and inferential strategies for interpreting specific risks. Their judgments will consider both the risks and benefits of a technology, as well as the perceived trustworthiness of the claims made by its supporters and detractors. Depending on the quality of the information that they receive, laypeople may or may not understand a technology well enough to judge it fairly. Professionals can increase the chances of a fair judgment by adopting a scientific approach to communication. That includes conducting formal analyses to identify the facts most critical to lay decisions, designing communication that are consonant with result from the large research literature on judgment and decision making, and conducting rigorous empirical tests of those communications before their release. In order to achieve these standards, communication must be viewed as a strategic activity, fully integrated with product development and risk management, rather than treated as an afterthought, thereby creating needless economic and health risks.