

Emergency Risk Communication

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What do you do if a reporter asks you about something that is still unknown or uncertain?

Crisis events are inherently full of uncertainty. If you don't have the facts yet, explain the process of obtaining accurate information. Even in the absence of verified information, it is important to show the public that adequate scientific expertise is in place and responding to the crisis.

2. How do you respond to errors in reporting?

If the errors are minor (that is, they don't affect the point of the story or your key message), ignore them. If errors are more substantive (in other words, they have the potential to cause further problems or harm the public), move quickly to correct them. You can usually take care of important but isolated mistakes with a polite phone call to the reporter. If the error is major (your key message has been greatly distorted or false information has been widely reported), you may need to make a public statement or hold a news conference to correct the information.

3. When communicating with the media, should you own up to mistakes you or your agency have made?

Inevitably, people managing an emergency response are going to make mistakes. Risk communication expert Peter Sandman recommends immediate acknowledgment of your mistakes. Don't try to cover it up; bad news does about twenty times as much damage if you try to keep it secret and fail than if you own up to it forthrightly. And don't just own up to your mistakes—be apologetic. Acknowledging your mistakes will free the media and the public to focus on other things. The worst response to your mistakes is defensiveness. Defensiveness can backfire into more attention paid to your errors.

4. How do you control damaging rumors?

Rumors have the potential to cause additional damage during a public health crisis. For example, during the 2003 SARS outbreak, an inaccurate rumor circulated in the Puget Sound region that a worker in a local mall had been diagnosed with SARS. As a result, people avoided that mall, dealing an economic blow to the business owners and the community.

- If a damaging rumor is confined to a small audience, correct it within that group—don't create a major public event.
- If a damaging rumor is widely known and spreading, you should move aggressively and very publicly to correct it.
- When squelching a rumor, try to be as thorough as you can in closing off possible avenues of future, similar rumors. For example, if the rumor is that "The health department is planning to quarantine all households with measles," your