

# A Worrier's Guide to Risk

Stories about risk can be worrying or even frightening. David Spiegelhalter's ideas can help you understand more and worry less.

## Life's uncertain

We don't always know what will happen

- 1. Uncertainty can be fine.** Would you want to know exactly how and when you were going to die? Not many would.
- 2. Stuff happens.** The overall pattern of events can often be predicted surprisingly well but not the detail. We can make a good guess at the number of car fatalities next year, but not who will be involved.
- 3. Rare events are more common than you think.** There are so many possible rare events we know some will happen but not which ones – someone usually wins the lottery.

## Evidence can mislead us

We often can't see the full picture

- 4. Jumping to conclusions.** The media reports crimes that make a good story – don't assume the amount and type of crime reported reflects true crime rates.
- 5. Runs of good/bad luck happen.** Reduced accidents at an accident black spot may not be the speed camera but just a change from a run of bad luck.
- 6. One thing may look like another.** It doesn't mean they are the same. Only a small fraction of the women who screen positive for breast cancer actually have the disease – the others are that much larger group of healthy women who just happen to have similar test results.
- 7. The past is past.** Things change, and as the banks always say and the credit crunch has proven, 'past performance is not necessarily a guide to future performance'.

## What about me

Should I worry?

- 8. Am I bovered?** How does the danger relate to my circumstances? Seasonal flu is a serious risk to the elderly and chronically ill but not to healthy young adults.
- 9. Can I do anything about it?**
  - **No?** So don't worry about things you can't change. The asteroid that will destroy the earth may be on its way.
  - **Yes, but...** there's more to life than maybe living a few extra days, weeks or months. "I would rather have the occasional bacon sarnie than be 110 and dribbling into my All-Bran"
- 10. They would say that, wouldn't they?** Check who is making the claim. What is their interest in influencing me – personal, financial, commercial, religious, political, headlines etc?
- 11. What am I not being told?** He may well have got better after he took this wonder treatment, but am I being told about the people who didn't get better?
- 12. Size matters.** A big increase in a very small risk may not be important – twice almost-nothing is still almost-nothing.

The key point is to get the 'balance' right for your life