

Chance (Spring 1991)

Risk Watchers

One of the occupational hazards of being a statistician is having to read all those articles on the risks to your health of things that you do everyday. Worse is having to listen to your colleagues on the subject. When I join them for lunch, for example, and my plate of corned beef and cabbage arrives, they all stare at me. "How could you?" "All that sodium." "And nitrates too!" "Haven't you read the study by Finkelstein and Fienberg in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*? Or don't you believe the results?" All of this has an effect on me of course--indigestion. But I eventually succumb to peer pressure. Next time I tell the waiter to hold the cabbage.

This peer pressure affected me in other ways too. First, I gave up smoking. That was no easy feat. To do so, I joined a local branch of *Nicotine Anonymous*. In this club, whenever you get an urge to smoke, you call up a fellow member and the two of you go out and get drunk together.

It's not enough, however, to worry about smoking. Now scientists have established that you are at risk from *passive* smoking by being in the same room where others smoke. In Washington, we also have to worry about passive snorting.

Losing weight was another effect of peer pressure, although my doing so was not so much because of the urging of my colleagues as it was my noticing one day that I had become so big that I had to let out the shower curtain. A friend tried to coax me to join a weight reduction club. You start out with a basic diet. For example, for breakfast you can have one slice of grapefruit, one-half slice of high fiber seven grain bread, 0.2 grams of non-fat margarine, and half a glass of skim water.

"How do you live on that starvation diet?," I asked my friend.

"Substitutions, she answered. "For example, for the slice of grapefruit, you can substitute a tea bag."

"But that's still ridiculous. Surely you don't eat like that."

"The secret that makes it work," she whispered, "is to remember that, with each substitution, you are allowed a half-pound of Oreo cookies."

I began to think of applying substitutions more broadly to managing everyday risks we encounter. I consulted the best risk analysts to come up with the following behaviors that could be substituted for one another without incurring any increased risk:

Substitutable Behaviors

| Behavior | Behavior with Equivalent Risk |
|---|---|
| Eating a pastrami sandwich | Flying from New York to Los Angeles. |
| Eating a dozen oysters on the half shell. | Eating two half shells. |
| Drinking 30 cups of coffee before noon. | Walking through Times Square wearing only your Hanes BVDs. |
| Jogging 3.5 miles. | Watching <i>that</i> Madonna video. |
| Sitting in front of your computer's cathode ray tube for a day. | Getting in the supermarket express line with more than nine items. |
| Smoking one pack of cigarettes per day for a year. | Telling a member of the Gambino family that he can drop dead. |
| Driving ten miles per hour above the speed limit. | Deducting that cruise to the Bahamas as a necessary business expense. |
| Drinking a bottle of cheap scotch. | Telling Arnold Schwarzenager that, in his last movie, he looked like a sissy. |
| Eating a feeding trough of popcorn from the movie concession stand. | Standing near the microwave while waiting for the popcorn to pop. |
| Sunning an hour on the beach without any protection. | Consenting to a <i>60 minutes</i> interview with Mike Wallace. |
| Commuting 25 miles per day on the Los Angeles or Long Island freeways for a year. | Three weeks of duty with the New York Police Bomb Disposal Unit. |
| Driving while under the influence. | Walking down the streets of Washington in broad daylight. |

Juggling all of these substitutions may have reduced my risk, but being consciously worried about all of the risks has made me a nervous wreck. So, at my doctor's advice, I'm going home early tonight to relax with a bottle of scotch before enjoying a dinner of corned beef AND cabbage. In the meantime, does anybody have a cigarette?