

Animals in research

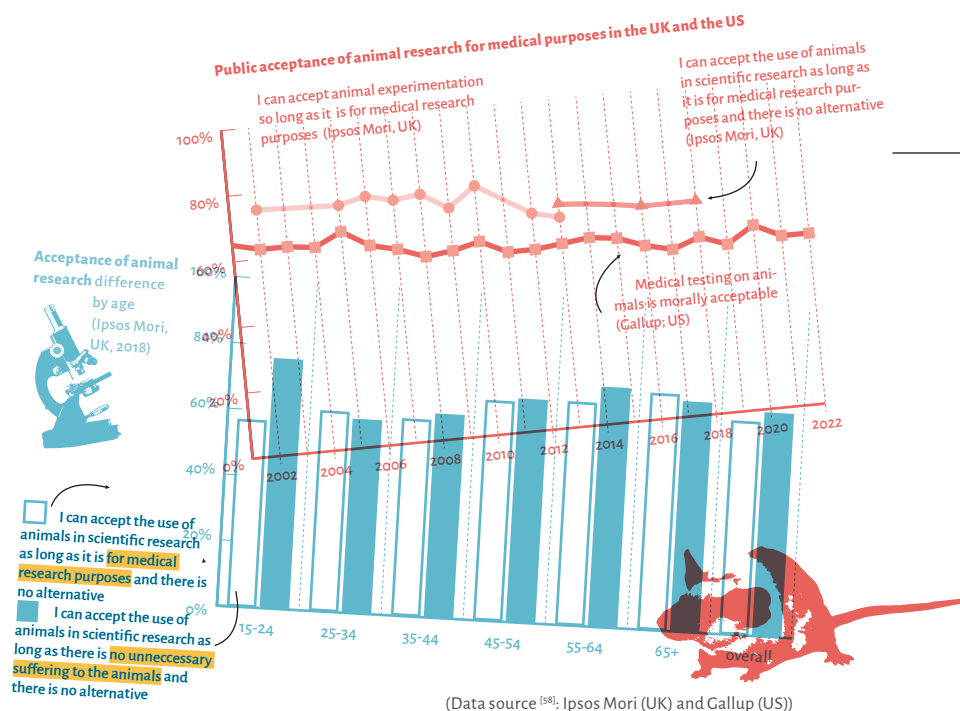
Animal testing in research has been a controversial and passionately debated topic in science and science communication for many decades. And just to be clear: Researchers do not enjoy killing animals. Great efforts are being made to reduce or replace animal experiments where possible. But in certain cases, animal testing is considered to be of great value and ethically correct.

To be able to discuss this topic as a scientist—regardless of whether your research involves animal experiments or not—you need to be aware of how it is perceived by society. There are many people who have no problem with animal research as long as the control mechanisms work and the aims are noble (see illustration). Others are not OK with it and would accept the consequences, and others are even militant. Public perception can vary from country to country and change over time. If the research you are communicating involves animal testing, you should prepare your communication around this work accordingly.

Do some background research/reading: (i) If you head a communications department, you need to ensure that a communication strategy around this topic is in place. (ii) If you are a researcher, you need to align your communication with the institution's communication strategy. (iii) Know how animal testing is regulated in your institution/country and be familiar with the 3Rs (replace, reduce, refine). (iv) Research some facts, figures and myths. For example, cats, dogs and non-human primates account for 0.2 per cent of animals used for research in the EU (2019) ^[56] and animal experiments for cosmetics have been banned in the EU since 2010. (v) Understand public opinion and be aware of different perceptions. For example, in the US, 60 per cent of men in a survey said they support the use of animals in research, but only 35 per cent of women said the same ^[57]. There are significant cultural differences regarding what is considered necessary for animal welfare. And empathy towards zebrafish or dogs also varies widely.

Prepare your communication: (i) Focus on research results rather than the technical approach. (ii) Be prepared if the topic comes up in an interview with a journalist. Check if your institution has a dedicated webpage or fact sheet that you can refer to. (iii) Put things in perspective: Many animals are killed for food/hunting/clothing or in car accidents. (iv) Avoid getting involved in lobby/opinion debates (for/against animal testing). (v) Consider the factual and emotional side. (vi) Mention the 3Rs principle.

There is more and more proactive communication around this topic, as the research world has recognised that it can only rectify the false images and misconceptions that the public might have by being more open and transparent. Eight European countries have now signed transparency agreements to communicate more openly about animal research.



Recommended reads:

- ◆ <https://www.understandinganimalresearch.org.uk>
- ◆ <https://www.animalresearch.info/en/>
- ◆ <https://www.nc3rs.org.uk/>