

Most Americans pay little attention to genetically modified foods, survey says

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A national survey shows that most Americans pay little attention to the debate over genetically modified foods, despite extensive media coverage of the issue.

The survey, released by researchers at Rutgers University, found that more than half (53 percent) say they know very little or nothing at all about genetically modified (GM) foods, and one in four (25 percent) say they have never heard of them. Even with the media attention resulting from recent ballot initiatives in California (Proposition 37) and Washington State (Initiative 522) and legislative actions in at least 20 other states that would require labeling of GM foods, the Rutgers study found that only about a quarter (26 percent) of Americans realize that current regulations do not require GM products to be labeled.

"Americans do care about what's in their food, and they do read [labels](#)," said William Hallman, professor of human ecology in Rutgers' School of Environmental and Biological Sciences, and lead author of the study.

"Eighty-two percent of the respondents told us they sometimes or frequently or always read [food labels](#). But determining what labeling information they value is not a straightforward task. Whether consumers say they want GM food labels depends on how you ask the question, so we asked about it in several ways."

Before introducing the idea of GM foods, the survey participants were asked simply "What information would you like to see on food labels that is not already on there?" In response, only 7 percent raised GM food labeling on their own. A similar number (6 percent) said they wanted more information about where the food product was grown or processed. In contrast, when asked directly whether GM foods should be required to be labeled, 73 percent said yes.

The survey asked respondents to rate the importance of various kinds of information on food labels. Fifty-nine percent said that it was very or extremely important to have information about whether the product contains GM ingredients on a label. This is about the same number who indicated that it was similarly important to have information about whether the product was grown using hormones (63 percent), pesticides (62 percent), or antibiotics (61 percent), whether it was grown or raised in the United States (60 percent), and whether the product contains allergens (59 percent).

Genetic modification of food involves the transfer of one or more genes to a plant or animal using the tools of biotechnology in order to express a desired trait, such as pest resistance. Recent estimates suggest that 90 percent of the corn, 93 soybeans and 95 percent of the sugar beets grown in the United States are GM varieties. Experts say most processed foods in the United States contain an ingredient from a GM crop.

Nonetheless, the survey showed considerable confusion regarding GM food and food ingredients. Fewer than half of Americans (43 percent) are aware that such products are available in supermarkets, and only about one quarter (26 percent) believe that they have ever eaten food containing GM ingredients.

Even those who say they are aware of the presence of GM foods in American stores are unclear about which foods are available. While three quarters correctly recognized that GM corn products are on store shelves, more than half mistakenly believed that GM tomatoes, wheat and chicken products are in supermarkets. More than 40 percent believe incorrectly that GM apples and rice are on the market, and more than a third believe that GM salmon and GM oranges are currently on offer.

Proponents of GM food labeling say that this confusion presents a strong case for mandatory labels. Opponents argue that mandatory labels would lead consumers to avoid GM foods altogether, despite the fact that the FDA and other food safety agencies have found that GM food products are safe. In fact, only 45 percent agreed that they thought it was safe to eat GM foods (only 8 percent strongly agreed), 63 percent of Americans report they would be upset if they were served GM food in a restaurant without knowing it, and 54 percent say they would be willing to pay more for food that was not genetically modified.

"Supporters and opponents of GM labeling have spent tens of millions of dollars to influence public opinion about GM labels around the country," Hallman said. "However, the results of our study suggest that most Americans still don't know much about GM foods, don't know they are eating them and are unaware that they don't have to be labeled. As a result, whether consumers want GM labels depends a great deal on how you ask the question."

The respondents were part of a nationally representative Internet-based

panel, and the data reported here have been weighted to be nationally representative, with a +/- 3% margin of error. A summary of the study's findings is available online at humeco.rutgers.edu/documents/PerceptionPerceptions.pdf . The study authors are Hallman, Cara L. Cuite, and Xenia K. Morin, all of the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences.

Provided by Rutgers University

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