

Public opinion on GMOs might impact similar technologies in stores

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Heather Akin, an assistant professor in the Missouri School of Journalism, found that an individual's perception of genetically modified organisms might impact their judgments about whether or not nanotechnology-enabled products should be labeled in stores. Credit: Missouri School of Journalism

If an individual is skeptical about the safety of genetically modified foods, chances are they're wary of nanotechnology, too.

Researchers at the University of Missouri have found that an individual's perception of [genetically modified organisms](#) might impact their judgments about whether or not [nanotechnology](#)-enabled products should be labeled in stores. GMOs are foods and organisms that have been genetically modified to alter their characteristics to achieve a specific outcome. For example, a tomato might be altered to increase its hardiness against pests. Nanotechnology involves manipulating a material's

atoms and molecules at the nanoscale to improve their function, such as making a t-shirt's fibers more resistant to sunlight, or altering a golf club's surface to help it hit balls harder.

"Most people do not have the time nor resources to keep up with every scientific advancement, and so they might rely on past experiences or judgments to make decisions about new technologies," said Heather Akin, an assistant professor in the Missouri School of Journalism. "For example, individuals have indicated their support for labeling GMO products if they believe they pose a risk to their health or the environment. So we wanted to know if people's opinions on GMOs influence how they feel about nanotechnology."

Currently, the U.S. does not require labeling the more than 1,800 nano products on the market. Because most of the public is unaware of nanotechnology, people might associate it with GMOs, another complex topic that involves manipulating materials at the molecular level.

Akin surveyed nearly 3,000 adults in the U.S. to collect their views on GMOs, nanotechnology and labeling products available for purchase. She found that those who believe GMOs are beneficial are less likely to support labeling of nano products, even if they don't believe nanotechnology has many benefits. Akin also found that those who are less trusting of scientific authorities are more inclined to favor labeling nano products if they do not think GMOs are beneficial to society. The findings could help businesses and regulating agencies understand how consumers view emerging technologies and better inform shoppers' purchasing decisions.

"If consumers are grouping together these two different technologies, they could potentially be basing their attitudes on nanotechnology on past beliefs, instead of the facts," Akin said. "That means they could be limiting their choices and

missing out on effective [products](#)."

More information: Heather Akin et al, Are attitudes toward labeling nano products linked to attitudes toward GMO? Exploring a potential 'spillover' effect for attitudes toward controversial technologies, *Journal of Responsible Innovation* (2018). DOI: [10.1080/23299460.2018.1495026](https://doi.org/10.1080/23299460.2018.1495026)

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