

Dr. Oz again takes on the GMO controversy again—Science or myth?

Celebrity talk show host Dr. Oz has a complicated and controversial relationship with GMOs—demonstrated again with his latest foray into this scientific minefield. Last week his show focused for the third time on GMOs, with a segment titled: [No to GMOs: The Global Conspiracy to Keep You From Knowing the Truth About Your Food](#). Oz pledged to address the myths and truths about GMOs, then did precisely the opposite.

The sentiments of one pop health expert don't necessarily warrant concern from the scientific community. But Oz visits the homes of nearly four million people a day with his television show and about the same number of people visit his website every month and have "liked" his Facebook page. His reach is only growing: Hearst Magazines recently launched the inaugural issue of his magazine, *Dr. Oz The Good Life*. His influence may be great, but the scientific knowledge he imparts regarding GMOs is not.

During his most recent GMO segment, he briefly discussed the "fish tomato," an early hallmark and great source of contention in the GMO debate. The experimental tomato, never commercialized, added a gene from a winter flounder in order to create a fruit that could withstand frost.

From Oz's language and visual aids—he showed two bins of identical tomatoes one labeled non-GMO and one labeled GMO—viewers wouldn't be blamed for thinking the "fish tomatoes" were showing up in their salads. They are not. Putting aside the fact that the insertion of genes into a tomato to protect it from frost has been shown to be harmless, there are, in fact, no GM tomatoes approved or in the pipeline. He mocked up an image with apparently one goal in mind—to get the audience to go "ick," fanning their anxiety about "Frankenfoods."

Oz then moved on to his main argument against GMOs in this episode: the claim that growing genetically modified crops has led to increased use of "dangerous" pesticides. According to Oz, pesticides "have crept their way into the food supply in a big way because of genetically modified foods." This is a familiar argument against GMOs advanced by activists, but it's not accurate. [Scientific studies](#) have actually shown that an increase in GMO farming has led to a marked decrease in the most toxic pesticides.

He devoted the rest of the segment to the importance of labeling foods with GMOs because, as he claimed in the introduction, "Many believe it's global conspiracy to keep you from knowing if you're eating genetically modified foods. You want GMOs labeled, but the food industry is fighting back. Spending millions to keep those labels out of the supermarket."

The Grocery Manufacturers Association, which represents food companies that sell a lot of products with GMOs, had a predictable [response](#), but one that highlights Oz's lack of scientific grounding in his coverage:

Providing consumers with safe products is our number one priority, and we understand that some consumers have questions about genetically modified food ingredients. Genetically

modified ingredients are not only safe for people and our planet, but also have a number of important benefits.

Virtually every credible food safety organization and scientific study has found genetically modified food ingredients are safe and there are no negative health effects associated with their use. GMO crops use less water and fewer pesticides, reduce the price of crops by 15-30% and can help us feed a growing global population of seven billion people.

In the past Oz has been criticized by a wide range of sources—from a petition in [Academics Review](#), an association of geneticists and other scientists that evaluates popular scientific claims, to the [New Yorker](#), which profiled Oz—for allowing Jeffrey Smith the activist, author and filmmaker behind *Genetic Roulette*, a book and film critical of genetic modification, to claim, unchallenged, that GMOs are dangerous. (Oz's wife, Lisa, an author and frequent co-host on Oz's radio show, was a narrator of the film version of *Genetic Roulette*.) In an article for Forbes, Jon Entine, the executive director of the Genetic Literacy Project, [likened](#) Oz's fear-based "investigations" into GMOs to malpractice.

Oz's recent show included no scientists—only a woman, presumably a mom, who was confused about GMO labeling, and Scott Faber of the Environmental Working Group. [Keith Kloor](#), a *Discover* magazine blogger, took Oz to task for using "an activist from an environmental group with a demonstrable anti-GMO bias as an expert on the safety of agricultural biotechnology."

Oz's segments on GMOs are consistently critical, but in an article he wrote for [Time Magazine](#) in 2012 he took a more nuanced stance. Oz said he considered GMOs safe and that those who buy organic and try to avoid GMOs and chemicals in their food are snobs, snooty and elitists. Many anti-GMO activists [called him a sell-out](#) for his balanced comments.

When asked about the article by *Miami New Times*, Oz said: "I spoke out openly about the fact that I think we deserve as a nation to know if a food is GMO. Doesn't mean that we shouldn't eat GMO foods, but as you say, we don't know, really, what the impact of these foods is going to be across our population, so at least let me know!"

Oz's [website](#) also uses more broad-minded language. "Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are highly controversial, but there are legitimate arguments on both sides of the debate," the site reads. That balanced language is not reflected on his shows, which, like the latest segment, are more likely to promote urban myths than sound science.

The truth is every major [international science body](#) in the world has reviewed multiple independent studies and has come to the [conclusion](#) GMO crops are as safe or safer than conventional or organic foods—a fact that viewers are not likely to hear on Dr. Oz.

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