

## Is genetic modification of foods 'ethical'?

Food is cultural, social and deeply personal, so it's no surprise that modifications to the way food is produced, distributed and consumed often lead to [ethical debates](#). Developments in the genetic modification (GM) of foods and crops has resulted in a [raft of controversies](#).

Ethics can help here. While science determines whether we can safely modify the genetic makeup of certain organisms, ethics asks whether we should. Ethics tries to move beyond factual statements about what is, to evaluative statements about the way we should act towards ourselves, each other and the environment we inhabit. But things are not always so clear-cut.

Ethics of GM foods can be developed by looking at virtue or character. Does the activity of engaging in the development of GM foods and crops erode virtues while producing vices? Or is GM technology a prudent use of knowledge for humanitarian goals?

There are also concerns about the moral status of the organism itself – does the modification of an organism's genetic makeup represent a wrong to the dignity or integrity to the organism? This position depends on arguments that nature has dignity and interests beyond those of its human inhabitants. Such arguments are not readily accepted due to their metaphysical or theological overtones and dependence on essentialist idea of nature.

The most common way of framing the ethics of GM foods is to ask: do GM foods and crops present negative or harmful consequences for individuals, populations or the environment? Most scientists argue that GM foods are safe to eat and will not harm consumer health.

It is unlikely these issues will be resolved any time soon – and likely that new ones will be added – but one area that can be worked on is discourse ethics. Until productive discourse is established, barriers between opposing views will only strengthen.

**Read the full, original article:** [Because we can, does it mean we should? The ethics of GM foods](#)