

Pew survey: Americans don't trust scientists on GMOs, but are warming to GM foods

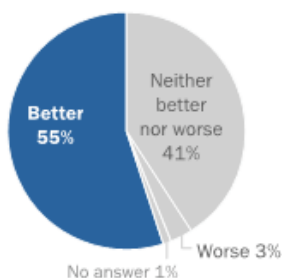
Skepticism of genetically modified (GM) foods remains strong in America, although the embrace of the safety of biotechnology has grown dramatically over the past two years. Well, more than half of adults—57%—now say that GM foods are as safe or safer than non-GM varieties. A strong majority also believe that organic produce is healthier than conventionally grown varieties. That's the headline takeaways from a [new Pew Research Center survey](#).

The research also reveals a troubling lack of trust of scientists by most Americans, most particularly among young consumers, who are more likely than other adults to reject the overwhelming scientific consensus that GM crops are as safe or safer than organic or other conventionally grown foods.

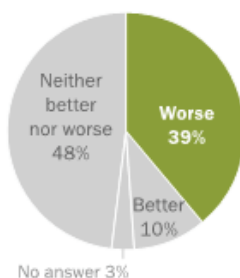
Most Americans see health benefits in organics, a sizable minority sees health risks in GM foods

% of U.S. adults who say the following

Organic produce is ___ for health than conventionally grown produce



GM foods are ___ for health than non-GM foods



Note: Beliefs about effects of genetically modified (GM) foods includes those who lean toward each response.

Source: Survey conducted May 10-June 6, 2016.

"The New Food Fights: U.S. Public Divides Over Food Science"

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Pew asked 1,480 adults a number of questions about their views of what have come to be known as GM foods. Some remain enraptured about organically grown food.

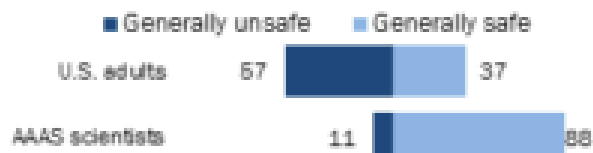
Some 55% believe that organically grown produce is

healthier for them than conventionally grown varieties. (About 70% of processed food contains ingredients from GM crops.) However, only four in 10 say they buy organic products at least "some of the time".

Those aged 18-49 are more likely than others to consider organic food to be healthier and 48 percent of those aged 50-64 say GM foods are worse for their health, compared to just 29 percent of those aged 65 and older.

Wide Differences Between Public and Scientists on Safety of GM Foods

% of each group saying it is generally safe or unsafe to eat genetically modified foods



AAAS scientists, who are more science-minded and advocates of crop biotechnology, well believe GM foods are as safer or healthier than non-GM

Public Largely Skeptical of Scientific Understanding of Health Effects

Some 39% consider GM foods worse for their health than non-GMO alternatives.

Those numbers are a sharp improvement in the belief in GM product safety from a [PEW survey released in January 2015](#). At that time, a majority of the general public, 57%, believed that GM foods were generally *unsafe* to eat, while only 37% viewed them as safe. Respondents in the prior survey were not asked if they thought GM foods might be healthier.

Public-scientist divide on GMO safety

The latest survey also underscored the deep divide between scientists and the public over perceptions of GM safety. The 2015 survey found an overwhelming consensus among scientists at the American Association for the Advancement of Science that GM crops are safe—88%. That was a higher percentage than the 87% of AAAS scientists who believed that humans play a key role in global warming.

The divide grew last May—about the time when PEW began conducting this new survey—when the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine released a [report](#) stating that fears about the health risks from eating GM foods are unfounded. The independent scientists found no credible evidence linking GM foods to any diseases or health disorders. This isn't the only time a major scientific organization of scientists has endorsed the safety of consuming GM foods. The World Health Organization, the American Medical Association, the European Commission, the Royal Society and the American Association for the Advancement of Sciences (AAAS) have all released [statements](#) affirming the safety to humans of GM foods. There are some [2,000 scientific studies](#) that have found no ill effects on humans or animals from consuming GMOs.

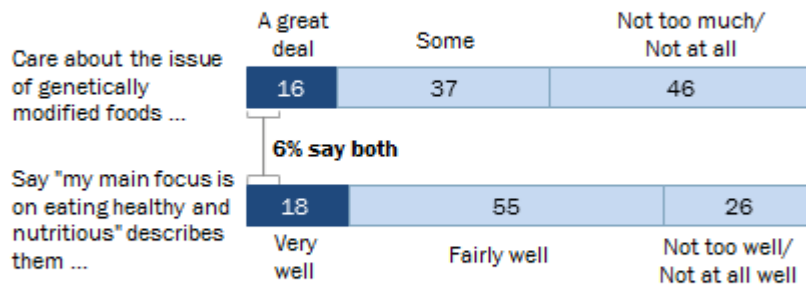
What is driving consumer attitudes?

According to lead author Cary Funk, interest in food and nutrition issues was the main driver of the divisions in opinions on organic and GM foods:

The data suggest that people's divisions are linked to their interest in food issues and how they think food consumption ties to their well-being. Their views are not driven by their political attitudes, their level of education, their household income, or where they live.

Two largely distinct groups of Americans are focused on food issues

% of U.S. adults who ...



Note: Respondents who gave other responses or who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted May 10-June 6, 2016.

"The New Food Fights: U.S. Public Divides Over Food Science"

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For example, 76% of those that care about GM

food issues say that most or some of what they eat is organic compared to the 75% of those with little concern about GM foods who say they eat very little or no organic food at all.

Strikingly, overall most Americans do not feel strongly about the GM food issue as just 16% identified themselves to Pew as such—a fact that may surprise some people. After all, an overwhelming majority of Americans, in some surveys more than 90%, that they want GMOs labeled. However, other data support the finding that the issue is below the radar for most Americans. For [example](#), a 2013 Rutgers University study found that when people were asked “what information do you want to be labeled on your food” (as opposed to asking “do you want GMOs labeled” as the question is normally phrased) only 7% cited GM ingredients. Similar [results](#) were obtained in a 2014 survey conducted by the International Food Information Council.

This is not to say the public does not care about the food they eat. On the contrary, 72% of US adults told Pew that they believed that eating healthy and regular physical activity was important to their health. But when it comes to food, most Americans just don’t think much about GMOs—unless a survey prompts them to.

Public does not trust scientists

Despite the exhaustive scientific analysis on GM foods and prestigious endorsements, according to the survey the public does not have confidence that science and scientists know enough about GMOs. Just 19% think scientists understand the health effects of GMOs, while 35% believe they do not understand the health effects of GM foods at all or well.

Just 35% of those surveyed say that they trust scientists a lot to give “full and accurate” information about the health effects of GMO foods and while less than one third of the public, 30%, believe that scientists rely on the best available evidence on the effects of GM foods. Even among those adults with “high scientific knowledge” there is some distrust of scientists, as only 51% of this group trusts information

about GM foods from scientists a lot.

Scientists need to find a way to bridge this gap and educate the public on GMOs because the public does want their input—60% of US adults told Pew that scientists should play a major role in GM policy.

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