

Consumers remain wary of GM foods, potentially slowing global adoption of biotech crops

Despite nearly three decades in the marketplace and near-universal scientific consensus on their safety, a new international survey finds that majorities of people in most countries remain wary of genetically modified (GM) foods, perhaps due to years of demonization by anti-science activists.

However, the [Pew Research Center survey](#) also found that large numbers of people do not believe they know enough about the technology to determine whether GM foods are safe to eat. In the Netherlands, for example, just 29 percent of those surveyed said they believe GM foods are unsafe to eat, while 50 percent said they don't know enough to make a judgment. Similar trends were seen in Singapore, Japan and the United Kingdom.

The survey found that people with more education — particularly those who have had at least three science courses — are more inclined to see GM foods as safe.

The skepticism is highest in Russia and Poland, where the cultivation of GM crops is prohibited and the government has joined advocacy groups in rejecting the technology. Some 70 percent of Russians and 67 percent of Poles said they believe GM foods are unsafe to eat, according to the survey. Just 18 percent and 17 percent, respectively, said they do not know enough to say.

Previous [research](#) has suggested that those who believe they are well-informed about biotechnology and hold strong views in opposition actually know the least.

Only Australia was evenly split, with 31 percent of respondents saying the foods are safe and 31 percent replying unsafe. Another 37 percent said they didn't know.

Though Europe in general has been considered resistant to GM foods, the survey found that attitudes varied widely by country. In the UK, 31 percent said they felt the foods are unsafe, a figure that increased to 34 percent in Sweden, 48 percent in Germany, 54 percent in France and 62 percent in Italy.

In India, where just one GM crop — Bt cotton — is grown, 58 percent said they think GM foods are unsafe and 26 percent said safe. High rates of skepticism were also reported in South Korea (57 percent) and Taiwan (50 percent).

The findings underscore a dichotomy between public attitudes and scientific consensus that is also found in other controversial topics, such as vaccines and climate change. A [2016 report](#) from the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine emphasized the consensus among scientific experts in the United States that GM foods are safe — a conclusion that also was reached by [an expert panel in Japan](#). Yet despite this consensus, activists continue to spread misinformation about the safety of GM foods and crops.

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The issue becomes increasingly important as the international farming community faces challenges related to climate change and a growing global population. GM crops are viewed as one way to help agriculture reduce its environmental footprint and increase yields without bringing more wild lands into production. But consumer acceptance is key to widespread adoption.

The survey did not include countries in South America, where GM crops are widely cultivated, or Africa. In the United States, where GM crops were first introduced and remain ubiquitous, 38 percent said they believe GM foods are unsafe, 27 percent safe and 33 percent said they don't know enough to judge.

Women tend to be more skeptical about the safety of GM foods than men, the survey found.

The survey, which was part of a broader global assessment of attitudes toward science and scientists, was conducted between October 2019 and March 2020.

Joan Conrow has more than 35 years of experience as a journalist and editor. She specializes in environmental issues, biotechnology, and agriculture, and is especially interested in how these highly charged topics are playing out globally. Joan holds a BA in history and journalism and is certified in beekeeping, mediation, and facilitation. Find Joan on Twitter [@joanconrow](#)

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