

## **Broad Skepticism is the Harvest For Genetically Modified Foods**

With safety concerns widespread, Americans almost unanimously favor mandatory labels on genetically modified foods. And most say they'd use those labels to avoid the product.

Barely over a third of the public believes that genetically modified foods are safe to eat. Instead 52 percent believe such foods are unsafe, and an additional 13 percent are unsure about them. That's broad doubt on the very basic issue of food safety.

Perception of genetically modified foods		
Safe	Unsafe	No opinion
35%	52	13

Nearly everyone, moreover – 93 percent – says the federal government should require labels on food saying whether it's been genetically modified, or "bio-engineered" (this poll used both phrases). Such near-unanimity in public opinion is rare.

Fifty-seven percent also say they'd be less likely to buy foods labeled as genetically modified. That puts the food industry in a quandary: By meeting consumer demand for labeling, it would be steering business away from its genetically modified products.

**ORGANIC** – The image problem of genetically modified food is underscored by contrast to organic foods. While only five percent of Americans say they'd be more likely to buy a food labeled as genetically modified, 52 percent say they'd be more likely to buy food that's labeled as having been raised organically.

Food labeled:	More likely to buy	Less likely to buy	No difference
Genetically modified	5%	57	34
Organically raised	52	10	36

**WOMEN** – Genetically modified foods are particularly unpopular among women, another problem for food producers since so many women do the family shopping.

Sixty-two percent of women think genetically modified foods are unsafe to eat, a view that's shared by far fewer men, 40 percent. Indeed a plurality of men think these foods are safe, while women disagree by better than 2-1.

Similarly, while 49 percent of men say they'd be less likely to buy food labeled as genetically modified, that jumps to 65 percent of women. (Similar numbers of women and men say they're more likely to buy organic foods.)

	GM foods:		Less likely to buy GM-labeled foods	More likely to buy foods labeled organic
	Safe	Unsafe		
Women	25%	62	65%	54%
Men	46	40	49	49

**OTHER GROUPS** – There's also a distinction by age; people under 45 are about 10 points more likely than their elders to think genetically modified foods are safe to eat. But a bare majority of young adults still calls GM foods unsafe.

There's also a political difference; Republicans divide evenly on whether genetically modified foods are safe or unsafe. Independents rate them unsafe by a 20-point margin; Democrats, by a 26-point margin.

**BACKGROUND** – This poll, done for ABCNews.com by telephone among a random sample of adults across the country, described genetic engineering as a process by which “scientists can change the genes in some food crops and farm animals to make them grow faster or bigger and be more resistant to bugs, weeds and disease.” Organic foods were described as raised “without the use of pesticides, chemical fertilizers or feed additives.”

Genetic modification of foods has been in development since the 1980s, inciting heated argument pro and con. A variety of genetically modified crops has been approved by the FDA for general use, and it's reviewing an application to market genetically modified fish.

The FDA has said labeling isn't necessary because there's no evidence genetic engineering changes a food's quality, safety, “or any other attribute.” In a report late last year, the American Medical Association also said there was “no scientific justification for special labeling of genetically modified foods, as a class.”

Starlink, a genetically modified corn that is approved for use in animal feed but not for human consumption, made its way into human foods last year. The government reported last week that Starlink did not cause allergic reactions in people who reported health problems after eating it.

**METHODOLOGY** - This ABC News.com survey was conducted by telephone June 13-17, 2001, among a random national sample of 1,024 adults. The results have a three-point error margin. Sampling, data collection and tabulation by TNS Intersearch of Horsham, Pa.

Analysis by Gary Langer.

ABC News polls can be found at ABCNEWS.com on the Internet at:

<http://www.abcnews.com/sections/us/PollVault/PollVault.html>

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Here are the full results:

97. Scientists can change the genes in some food crops and farm animals to make them grow faster or bigger and be more resistant to bugs, weeds and disease. Do you think this genetically modified food, also known as bio-engineered food, is or is not safe to eat?

	Safe	Unsafe	No opin.
6/17/01	35	52	13

98. Do you think the federal government should or should not require labels on food saying whether it has been genetically modified or bio-engineered?

	Should	Should not	No opin.
6/17/01	93	6	1

99. If you saw a label on food at your market saying (READ ITEM - ROTATE ORDER), would you be more likely to buy it, less likely to buy it, or would it make no difference in your buying decision?

6/17/01

	More	Less	No diff.	No opin.
a. it had been genetically modified or bio-engineered	5	57	34	3
b. it had been grown or raised organically, without the use of pesticides, chemical fertilizers or feed additives	52	10	36	2

\*\*\*END\*\*\*