

# US public divided over food science: survey

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The way Americans eat has become a source of potential social, economic and political friction as people follow personal preferences reflecting their beliefs about how foods connect with their health, according to a new survey by the Pew Research Center.

The new food divides are encapsulated by how people assess the [health effects](#) of two kinds of food: organic and genetically modified (GM) foods. The survey of 1,480 American adults finds that 55% of Americans believe organically-grown produce is healthier than conventionally-grown varieties, while 41% say there is no difference between organics and conventionally-grown produce. Four-in-ten Americans (40%) say that most (6%) or some (34%) of the food they eat is organic.

Meanwhile, 39% of Americans consider GM foods worse for a person's health than other foods. This compares with 48% who say GM foods are no different from non-GM foods, and 10% say GM foods are better for health.

"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," said lead author and associate director of research at Pew Research Center Cary Funk. "Their views are not driven by their political attitudes, their level of education, their household income, or where they live."

Some 16% of U.S. adults say they care deeply about the issue of GM

foods. The people who feel this way are much more likely than those with less concern about this issue to consider GM foods worse for health (75% v. 17% of those with no or not too much concern about the GM food issue).

In addition, 18% of U.S. adults say they are particularly focused on healthy and nutritious eating. These Americans are especially likely to consider organic produce healthier than conventionally-grown produce. The data:

- 76% of those deeply concerned about the GM foods issue say most or some of what they eat is organic. By contrast, fully 75% of those with little concern about the issue of GM foods say they do not eat organic foods or not too much of what they eat is organic.
- 89% of those deeply concerned about the GM foods issue have purchased foods based on nutrition and ingredient labels, 89% have bought organics, and 74% have bought food labeled GMO-free in the past month.
- 87% of those who care a great deal about the GM foods issue say healthy eating is very important for a person's chances of a long and [healthy life](#), compared with 68% among those who do not care about the GM foods issue at all or not too much.
- More people with a deep concern about the issue of GM foods follow a vegan or vegetarian diet, at least mostly—21% compared with 6% of those who do not care too much or at all about the issue of GM foods.
- 70% of those focused on eating healthy and nutritious food say they eat about what they should most days, compared with just 13% of those with little or no priority on healthy eating.
- Women and men are about equally likely to be focused on healthy and nutritious eating (20% vs. 16%), but women are more likely than men to care deeply about the issue of GM foods

(20% vs. 12%) and women tend to be more pessimistic than men about the likely impact of GM foods on society.

In addition, younger generations, those ages 18 to 49, are more inclined than older adults to consider organic produce better for one's health. And 48% of adults ages 18 to 29 say GM food is worse for one's health than non-GM food. In comparison, 29% of those ages 65 and older say GM foods are worse for health.

Some 31% of Americans say it bothers them at least some when guests ask for special kinds of food options at a social gathering they are hosting. These feelings are about the same regardless of people's focus on eating healthy or concern about the issue of GM foods.

The public believes two controllable factors are critical for a long and healthy life: healthy eating and exercise. Fully 54% of Americans say that compared with twenty years ago, people in the U.S. pay more attention to eating healthy foods today. Smaller shares say people pay less attention (26%) or about the same amount of attention (19%) to eating healthy today.

Moreover, most Americans consider their future health within their grasp. Roughly seven-in-ten adults say that healthy eating habits (72%) and getting enough physical exercise (71%) are very important for improving a person's chances of living a long and healthy life. However, people's behavior does not appear to match that ideal. A 58% majority of U.S. adults say that, most days, they should probably eat healthier, while 41% of adults say they eat about what they should most days.

## **Food news 'whiplash' does not have great impact on people's overall views**

The new Pew Research Center survey finds a majority of Americans sense the proliferation of conflicting news reports about the health effects of food and drink. A 61% majority of Americans says it makes sense that findings conflict with prior studies because "new research is constantly improving our understanding" while 37% of Americans say "research about the health effects of what people eat and drink cannot really be trusted because so many studies conflict with each other."

Reactions to news studies with conflicting reports about food and nutrition science connect with people's level of [science knowledge](#). Half of those with low science knowledge say that "even though new studies sometimes disagree with prior findings, the core ideas of healthy eating are pretty well understood" (50%) and but a nearly equal share (47%) says it is difficult to know how to eat healthy due to conflicting information. By contrast, just 8% of those with high science knowledge say it is difficult to know how to eat healthy, while 92% say the core ideas of [healthy eating](#) are pretty well understood.

## **The public has limited trust in scientists studying GM foods**

"This survey finds that Americans have limited trust in scientists connected with GM food," said Funk. "Just 19% of Americans say scientists understand the health effects of GM foods 'very well.' Some 44% of Americans say scientists understand this fairly well and 35% say scientists do not understand the health effects of GM at all or not too well."

Indeed, only a minority of Americans says that almost all (14%) or more than half (28%) of scientists agree that GM foods are safe to eat. And 35% say they trust scientists a lot to give full and accurate information about the health effects of GM foods, while 43% trust scientists some.

Fully 30% of Americans say the best available evidence influences scientists' research on the effect of GM food most of the time; 51% say this occurs some of the time while 17% say this does not occur too often or at all.

Despite mixed assessments of scientists working on GM food issues, 60% say scientists should have a major role in policy issues related to GM foods and 28% say they should have a minor role. A smaller share of Americans says that food industry leaders (42%) or elected officials (24%) should have a major role in policy decisions about GM foods. The data:

- People who are deeply concerned about the issue of GM foods give higher priority to having the general public's views represented in policy deliberations about GM foods. Fully 78% among this group say the general public should have a major role in policy decisions. A smaller majority say scientists should have a major role in GM food policy among this group (66%).
- Those with high science knowledge are more trusting of scientists to give full and accurate information about the health effects of GM foods: 51% trust information from scientists a lot, compared with 38% among those with medium science knowledge and 18% among those with low science knowledge.

These are among the findings from the new report, which is based on a nationally representative survey conducted May 10-June 6, 2016, among 1,480 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 4.1 percentage points.

**More information:** Read the report: [www.pewinternet.org/2016/12/01...the-new-food-fights/](http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/12/01...the-new-food-fights/)

Provided by Pew Research Center

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