

Public perspectives on food risks

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Roughly half of Americans (51%) say the average person faces a serious health risk from food additives over their lifetime, while the other half (48%) believes the average person is exposed to potentially threatening additives in such small amounts that there is no serious risk, according to a new study released today by Pew Research Center.

Seven-in-ten Americans believe [science](#) has had a mostly positive effect on the quality of food. But when asked about one area where new developments in biotechnology are changing the possibilities for how we grow and consume foods, roughly half (49%) believe that foods with genetically modified (GM) ingredients are worse for one's health than non-GM foods, and 44% say such foods are neither better nor worse, according to the nationally representative survey of 2,537 U.S. adults.

"As consumers are confronted with a flow of new food technologies and with ongoing debates over how what we eat can have a lasting impact on one's health, this study reveals a divided public over food issues, with women and people who care deeply about the issue of GM foods more wary of health risks from food additives and GM foods," said Cary Funk, director of science and society research at Pew Research Center and lead author of the report. "While there are consistent patterns in public beliefs about these food science issues, the divides do not fall along political lines. Instead, people seem to form their own 'food ideologies' about the relationship between health and the foods we eat."

Public divisions over these food issues align with gender and with how much people know about science, based on a nine-item index of factual

knowledge. On average, women are more concerned than men about potential [health risks](#) from food additives and from GM foods. People with low science knowledge tend to express more concern about health risk from these food groups compared with those high in science knowledge.

The 22% of Americans who care a great deal about the GM foods issue stand out as not only much more likely to think GM foods are worse for one's health than those who are less concerned, but also more likely to see a higher health risk from eating food produced with common agricultural and processing practices, including meat from animals given hormones or antibiotics, produce grown with pesticides or foods with artificial ingredients.

Among the key findings:

Americans hold mixed assessments of potential health risk from specific types of food additives, with majorities saying each poses at least some risk:

- Public concern is highest for meat from animals given antibiotics or hormones and produce grown with pesticides (32% and 31%, respectively, consider each to pose a great deal of health risk to the average person).
- 26% say food and drinks with artificial preservatives pose a great deal of health risk for the average person over time; 21% say the same about foods with artificial coloring.

When asked about eating habits regarding 10 broad types of food ingredients, 44% of U.S. adults say they restrict or limit consumption of artificial sweeteners, 38% report limiting sugar, 33% limit artificial preservatives and 28% limit artificial coloring.

Women are consistently more wary than men of food additives, as are those concerned about the GM foods issue:

- 39% of women say fruits and vegetables grown with pesticides pose a great deal of health risk, compared with 23% of men who say the same. Similarly, more women (39%) than men (25%) say meat from animals given antibiotics or hormones poses a great deal of health risk for the average person.
- 66% of those who care deeply about the GM foods issue believe that meat from animals given antibiotics or hormones poses a great deal of health risk to the [average person](#) over time, versus 12% among those who care not too much/not at all about the GM foods issue (a 54-percentage-point difference).
- People who report consuming more organics in their diet are also more likely to believe food additives pose a risk to health. For instance, 65% of those who say most or some of what they eat is organic say that, in general, food [additives](#) pose a serious health risk over time. By contrast, 41% of those who eat a smaller share of organics say this.

About half of U.S. adults see GM foods as worse for their health:

- 49% of Americans believe foods with GM ingredients are worse for one's health, while 44% say such foods are neither better nor worse than non-GM foods and 5% say they are better for one's health.
- The share of Americans who say that foods with GM ingredients are worse for one's health is up 10 percentage points, from 39% in 2016, with the uptick in concern primarily among those with low levels of science knowledge.
- 52% of those with low science knowledge say GM foods are worse for health, up 23 points from 29% in 2016. There is no

shift in beliefs among those with high science knowledge; 38% in this group say GM foods are worse for health, as did 37% in 2016.

- 49% of those high in science knowledge say GM foods are very likely to increase the global [food](#) supply, compared with 20% of those with low science knowledge.

Americans' views about organic foods tend to vary by age:

- 45% say that organic produce provides net benefits for health, 51% see no health advantage for organics over conventionally grown produce and 3% say organics are worse for health.
- Some 54% of those ages 18 to 29 and 47% of those 30 to 49 say organic produce is better for one's health. In comparison, 39% of those ages 65 and older believe organic produce is better for one's health than conventionally grown produce.
- Compared with 2016, the share of U.S. adults who say that organic fruits and vegetables are better for one's [health](#) declined from 55% to 45% in 2018. This shift in beliefs occurred among people with high and medium science knowledge, but not low science knowledge.

The report is drawn from a survey conducted as part of the American Trends Panel, a nationally representative panel of randomly selected U.S. adults recruited from landline and cellphone random-digit-dial surveys. The panel, which was created by Pew Research Center, is being managed by GfK. Data in this report are drawn from the panel wave conducted April 23-May 6, 2018, among 2,537 respondents. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is plus or minus 2.8 percentage points.

Provided by Pew Research Center

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