

Study: Many consumers say they are 'grossed out' by GMOs

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Dive Brief:

- After more than 20 years of genetic engineering in farming, consumers still remain skeptical and even say they are “grossed out” by genetically modified food, according to [a new study from Washington University in St. Louis](#). Sydney Scott, assistant professor and lead author of the paper “[An Overview of Attitudes Toward Genetically Engineered Foods](#),” said people tend to view naturalness as sacred, and genetically engineered food is a violation of that naturalness.
- That doesn’t explain why consumers tend to be fine with heavily processed foods but won’t go for GMOs, the study authors note. “Consumers seem to be saying it’s not OK to poke into the DNA. That’s yucky,” Scott said in a news release. “People are grossed out by that.”
- [Study authors found](#) that the U.S. tends to have a permissive approach to regulating genetically modified crops and “generally recognizes them as safe.” The European Union is more restrictive, allowing only two genetically engineered crops to be grown commercially: potatoes and maize. A key aim of the research team’s work was to expose

the gap between advocates of genetically engineered foods and opponents. “What we’re trying to figure out now is what will allow people to reach a better consensus,” Scott said in the press release. “I don’t think it’s insurmountable.”

Dive Insight:

Despite the fact that nearly half of U.S. cropland and 12% of total world cropland is used to grow GMO crops, consumers remain skeptical of what has been called “frankenfood.” But why are consumers OK with heavily processed foods and freaked out by apples that have been genetically altered so they don’t brown?

As calls for natural and organic foods continue to rise among younger buyers, a 2018 study by the Hartman Group found most people were aware of GMOs — although many were sketchy on the details. Nearly half said they would avoid buying products with GMOs, and a third said they don’t want to support companies that use GMOs in their products. When Hartman asked about GMOs 11 years ago, just 15% of those surveyed said they’d avoid them.

And some food manufacturers are responding to these studies by phasing out genetically modified ingredients. Del Monte reformulated fruit, vegetable and tomato products with non-GMO ingredients two years ago. Hormel’s Applegate brand did the same, and Earth Fare removed genetically modified ingredients from its private-label products last year. If more consumers exhibit reservations about GMOs, additional brands may have to do the same.

Other companies say educating consumers about GMO ingredients makes more sense than eliminating them. Brands that embrace GMOs say buyers like their foods as they are — as long as the brands educate consumers about use of GMOs and how they improve foods.

“I don’t think [GMOs are] uppermost in their minds,” David Lipman, chief science officer of Impossible Foods, told Food Dive. The Impossible Burger’s “secret” ingredient — plant based heme — is GMO. “People are interested in the Impossible Burger because it tastes more like meat.”

But soon consumers will at least know if the food they are eating contains GMO ingredients. The federal government is currently working to develop labeling rules for GMO ingredients, pursuant to a 2016 federal law. According to the proposed rule, the presence of bioengineered food or ingredients needs to be indicated through text, electronic or digital link disclosure, or one of three potential symbols. The symbols, all designed not to disparage biotechnology or the safety of food, are benign pictures containing the letters “BE.”

It may be wiser to be honest and open with consumers rather than drop GMOs due to public perception or lack of understanding. The popularity of Impossible Burger shows consumers are open to the idea of a modified food if they see it won’t harm them — and it might even enhance their dining experience. It also might make a huge difference when GMO labels get out into the public and consumers see how widespread GMO ingredients are. According to a 2015 story in Vox, more than 93% of corn and soy in the U.S. is genetically modified, and 60% to 70% of all products at the grocery store have some GMO ingredients.

Recommended Reading:

 Washington University in St. Louis [Research confronts 'yucky' attitudes about genetically engineered foods](#) 

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