

Two-thirds of Americans support gene editing in human embryos to prevent disease or disability

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Reuters/Athit Perawongmetha

And 30% don't think it's wrong to edit genes for physical features.

With the developments in gene editing, and recent [Chinese experiments](#) on babies, the question of [whether it's ethical](#) to genetically modify humans has left the realm of [sci-fi and philosophical speculation](#) to enter the very near future.

Is it acceptable, or even desirable, to gene-edit babies out of disease, for instance? Does that amount to eugenics? It seems the debate is less heated than one might expect, in America at least: According to [a survey by AP-NORC](#) (a research initiative by the Associated Press and the University of Chicago) on attitudes toward gene-editing technology, a solid majority said they were in favor of it when it comes to preventing disease.

The survey, which reached 1,067 adults in the US, found that only 12% of

respondents thought it acceptable to intervene through gene modification to enhance intelligence or physical prowess. That dropped to 10% for changing a physical attribute like eye color.

But 65% were OK with intervening in human genes to prevent non-fatal conditions, such as blindness. An even larger percentage (67%) would be fine with using gene editing to prevent diseases such as cancer, and 71% are in favor of doing so for incurable, hereditary diseases (cystic fibrosis, for instance, or Huntington's disease).

As a term of comparison, a [higher percentage](#) of Americans think abortion should be illegal in all and most cases. These people specifically include those who reject abortion motivated by the health of the baby, in particular when it comes to genetically hereditary conditions, even deadly. Many [anti-abortion activists](#) decry the practices of countries such as Denmark, where the law allows elective abortion in the case of, for instance, fetuses with Down syndrome—something that has led to a near-elimination of the disease. The findings of this survey, however, suggest that most Americans believe genetically hereditary conditions to be something worth editing out of a genome.

What is perhaps even more interesting is that the percentage of people who oppose intervention in any case of medical issues is below 20%, and it's only around 70% when it comes to altering other traits, such as abilities or physical features. This means three in 10 Americans are either in favor of, or somewhat fine with, editing genes for non-health reasons—even though, as the survey also found, 52% of Americans think gene editing would be used for unethical reasons.

However, Americans aren't particularly enthused by the idea of the federal government spending taxpayer money to finance gene-editing research: 48% oppose the idea, and only 25% approve of it.