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Divides over food science tied to personal concerns about eating, health

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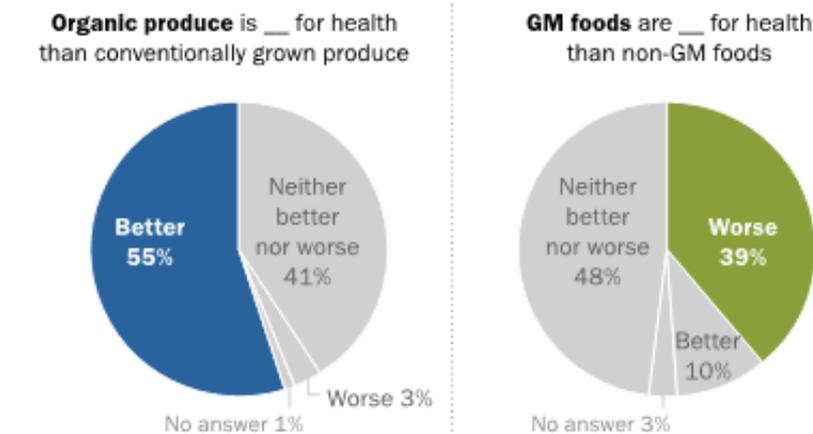
The American food landscape has seen major changes over the past 20 years. Genetically modified crops now account for a significant share of the food supply and, at the same time, the public's growing appetite for organic foods has helped them find a place in mainstream supermarkets. Meanwhile, an array of new food processing techniques have been introduced to make goods more marketable.

A new Pew Research Center survey (<http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/12/01/the-new-food-fights/>) finds that divides in public opinion over food are encapsulated by how people assess the health effects of two kinds of food: organic and genetically modified (GM) foods. Americans' beliefs about food connect with their personal concerns about the role of food choices in their long term health and well-being.

Here are six key takeaways from the report:

1 [\(http://www.pewresearch.org/ft_16-12-01_foodmostamericans/\)](http://www.pewresearch.org/ft_16-12-01_foodmostamericans/) **More than half (55%) of U.S. adults 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 to be 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% who say GM foods are better for health.



Note: Beliefs about effects of genetically modified (GM) foods includes those who lean toward each response.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted May 10-June 6, 2016.

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[\(http://www.pewresearch.org/ft_16-12-01_foodviewsandbehaviors/\)](http://www.pewresearch.org/ft_16-12-01_foodviewsandbehaviors/) **People's divisions over food issues are linked to their interest in the issue of GM foods, but not to politics or partisanship.** These divides do not fall along familiar political fault lines, nor do they strongly tie to other common bases for division such as education, income, geography or having minor-age children. Rather, they tie to individual concerns and philosophies about the relationship between food and well-being.

One is the degree of concern people have about the issue of GM foods. The 16% of U.S. adults who care deeply about the issue of GM foods are much more likely than those with less concern about this issue to consider GM foods worse for health and to believe that GM foods are very likely to create health problems for the population as a whole. They are also much more likely to consider organic produce healthier: 81% compared with 35% of those with no or not too much concern about the GM foods issue.

People deeply concerned about the issue of GM foods take that focus to the grocery aisles. The vast majority of this group (89%) has purchased foods based on the nutrition and ingredient labels in the past month; 89% have bought organics and 74% have bought foods labeled GMO-free. Fewer of those with less focus on the issue of GM foods have done the same – 57% of those who say they have little or no concern about the issue of GM foods decided what to buy based on the nutrition and ingredient label, and just 26% have bought food labeled GMO-free. Among Americans overall, 71% say they made purchasing decisions based on information in the labels in the past month.

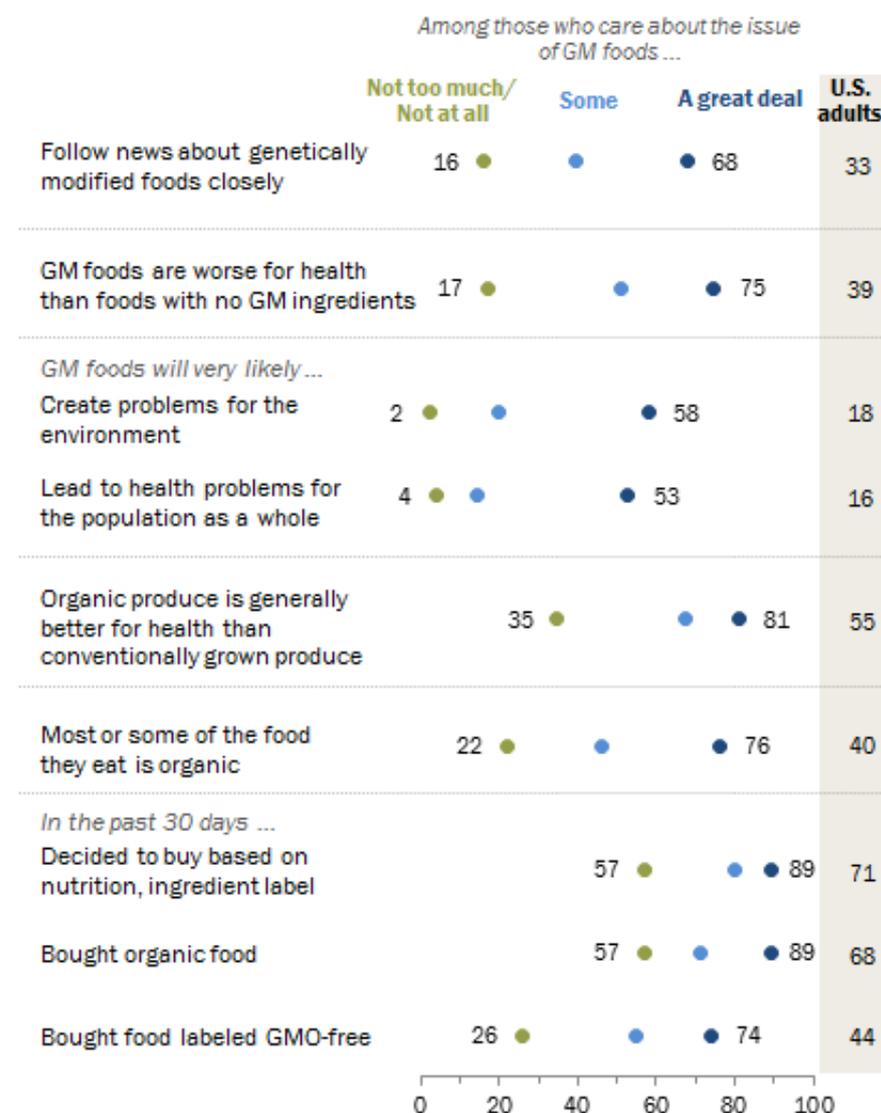
[\(http://www.pewresearch.org/ft_16-12-01_foodamericansviews/\)](http://www.pewresearch.org/ft_16-12-01_foodamericansviews/) **People's views about food issues are tied to how much they focus on healthy eating.** The 18% of Americans who say "focused on eating healthy and nutritious" describes them very well are more likely to believe healthy eating is very important for a person's chances of leading a long and healthy life (86% say this compared with 56% of those of those who say "focused on eating healthy and nutritious" describes them not at all or not too well). About six-in-ten (63%) in this group say most or some of what they eat is organic. In contrast, just

2 3 22% of those with little focus on eating healthy say at least some of what they eat is organic.

Americans focused on healthy and nutritious eating are more likely to follow a vegan or vegetarian diet – 22% say they are at least mostly vegan/vegetarian, compared with 3% of those with little or no priority on healthy eating. Those focused on healthy and nutritious eating are also more likely to report they have allergic reactions to food: 26% have at least a mild food allergy compared with 15% among those not particularly focused on healthy eating.

Views and behaviors about a wide range of food issues in U.S. are linked with concern about GM foods issue

% of U.S. adults



Note: Beliefs about effects of GM foods includes those who lean toward that response. Responses of following news about GM foods "very" or "somewhat" closely are combined. Respondents who gave other responses or did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted May 10-June 6, 2016.

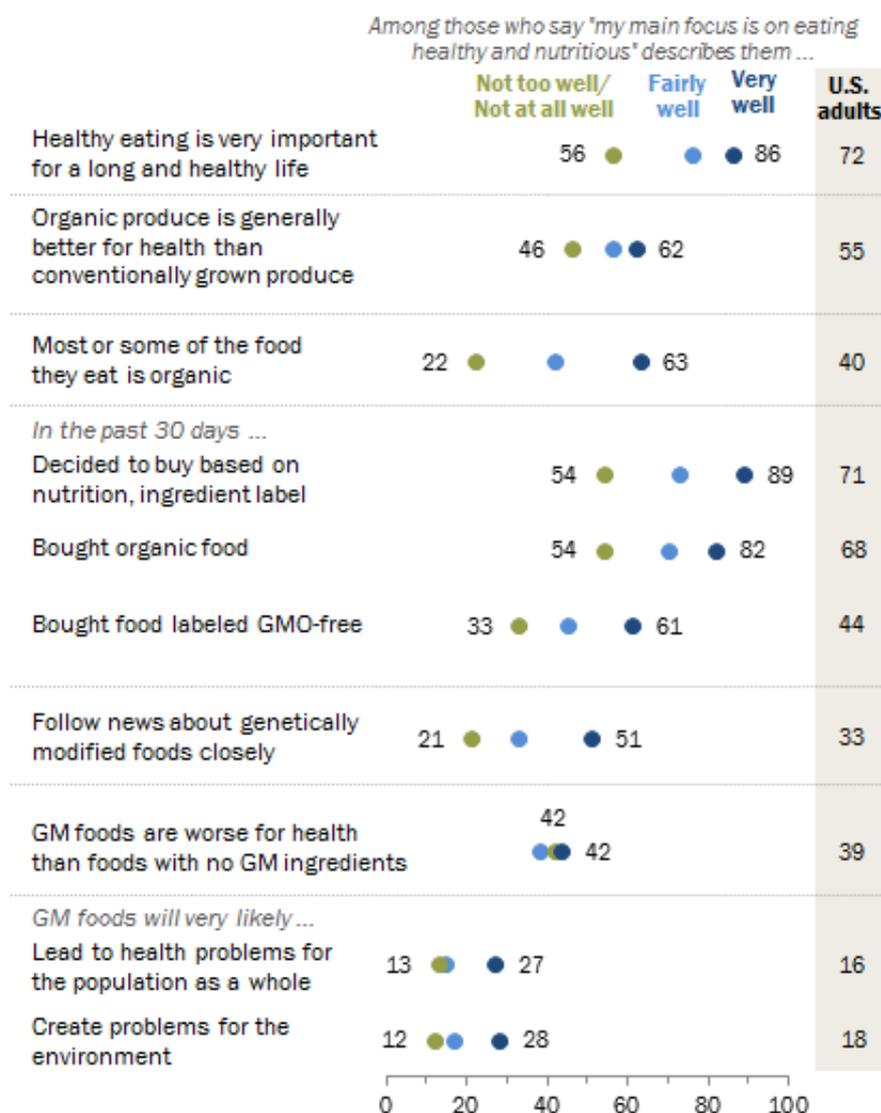
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(http://www.pewresearch.org/ft_16-12-01_foodlimitedtrust/) While a 2014 Pew Research Center survey (<http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/01/29/chapter-2-perspectives-on-the-place-of-science-in-society/>) found that most Americans (62%) saw benefits of scientific advances on the quality of food, the new survey found **there is considerable public skepticism in people's views of scientists connected with GM foods.** Just two-in-ten Americans (19%) 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 foods at all or not too well.

Three-in-ten Americans (30%) say research on GM foods is often based on the best available evidence. An equal share of U.S. adults say desires of scientists to help their industries influence research findings on GM foods most of the time; half (50%) of the public says this occurs some of the time.

Americans' views and choices about food are strongly linked with their focus on healthy and nutritious eating

% of U.S. adults



Note: Beliefs about effects of GM foods includes those who lean toward that response. Responses of following news about GM foods "very" or "somewhat" closely are combined. Respondents who gave other responses or did not give an answer are not shown.

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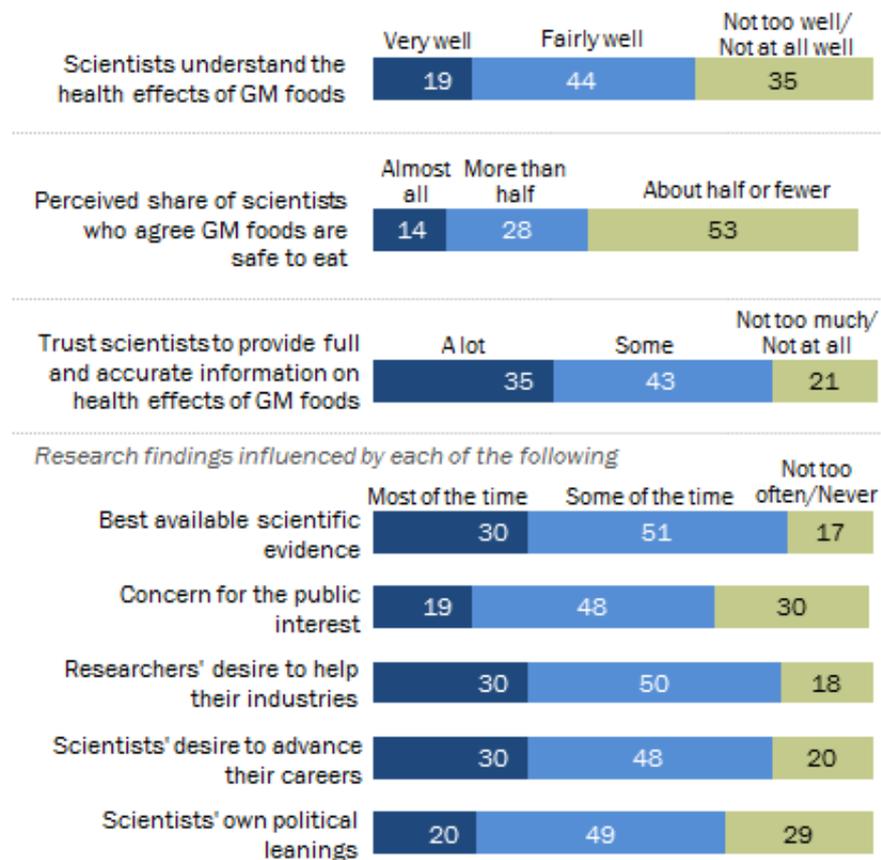
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(<https://www.nap.edu/catalog/23395/genetically-engineered-crops-experiences-and-prospects>) from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine suggests there is consensus among scientific experts that GM foods are safe. However, most Americans perceive considerable disagreement in the scientific community. Only a minority of Americans say that almost all (14%) or more than half (28%) of scientists agree that GM foods are safe to eat.

Public trust in information about the health effects of GM foods is higher for scientists than it is for several other groups: food industry leaders, the news media and elected officials. But only a minority of the public (35%) says they trust scientists a lot to give full and accurate information about this; 43% trust scientists "some."

Americans have limited trust in scientists connected with GM food

% of U.S. adults



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

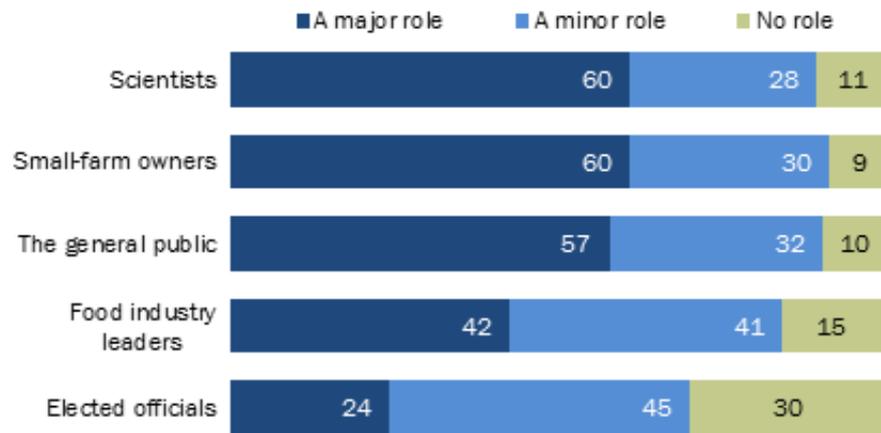
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted May 10-June 6, 2016.

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(http://www.pewresearch.org/ft_16-12-01_foodscientists/) **Most Americans think scientists should help make food policy; fewer think food industry leaders should have a major policymaking role.** Despite mixed assessments of scientists working on GM food issues, six-in-ten U.S. adults (60%) say scientists should have a major role in policy issues related to GM foods and 28% say they should have a minor role. Similar shares of Americans say that small-farm owners and the general public should have a major role in GM food policy. 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.

Most Americans say scientists, small-farm owners and general public should play major role in GM food policy

% of U.S. adults who say each of these groups should have ____ in making decisions about policy issues related to genetically modified foods



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted May 10-June 6, 2016.

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