

Consumer knowledge on GM foods

With the gradual appearance of genetically improved foods on world markets, many food companies are asking what the consumer knows and thinks about these products of modern biotechnology.

A survey was recently conducted by the Pretoria Technikon on behalf of AfricaBio, on consumers in the Pretoria-Sandton area of Gauteng Province to assess consumer knowledge of genetically modified foods and how to better inform them about this subject.

The survey was carried out in the Pretoria CBD, Menlyn, Sunnyside, Hatfield, Mandela, Orange Farm, Brooklyn, Atteridgeville, Rosebank, Pretoria West, Arcadia, Lenasia, Laudium, Sandton, Pretoria North and Danville. A total of 1022 people were interviewed of which 59% were black, 26% white, 13% Indian and 2% coloured. Of the consumers interviewed, 43% were male and 57% female. The age distribution of the consumers (as a percentage) was as follows:

	White	Coloured	Indian	Black
<18 years	2		1	8
18 to 25	7	1	4	21
26 to 30	6		4	15
31 to 40	4	1	2	10
41 to 50	1		1	3
>51 years	7			2

Of the consumers interviewed, 4% had no primary education, 7% had received primary education, 48% had received secondary education and 41% had received tertiary education. 27% earned less than R3 000 per month, 17% less than R13 000 and 3% more than R15 000. 40% had no fixed income.

What do consumers know about GMOs?

The survey results indicated that of the 1022 people interviewed only 27% knew about GMOs and of these 43% had heard of GMOs in the past year, 51% within the last two to five years and 6% more than five years ago. When asked from whom they had heard about GMOs for the first time, the reply was as follows: 8% from scientists, 29% from television, 10% from newspapers, 8% from the internet, 7% from magazines, 4% from the radio and 32% from other sources.

Less than 1% said they knew a great deal about gene technology, 6% had some knowledge, 20% knew a little and 74% knew nothing about the subject.

Consumer confidence

Of the people interviewed, 30% thought that GM foods were safe, 25% thought they were unsafe and 45% were uncertain. When asked whether they knew of any GM food currently available in South Africa, 9% knew of GM

maize, 2% of GM potatoes, 6% of GM tomatoes, 0.4% of GM soyabeans, 1% of GM oil seed and 17% of other GM foods. 65% did not know of any GM foods available in South Africa.

Sources of information

When questioned about who should provide information on GM foods, 17% indicated they would

want to be informed by the government, 15% by industry, 32% from nutritionists and 31% from professional biotechnology organisations. 4% were not particular about the source of the information. In this regard, however, it was interesting to note the responses (in percentage) of the different population groups.

Want to receive GMO information from:

	Government	Industry	Nutritionists	Bio Association	Other
White	1	5	15	3	2
Coloured	1	0	0	1	0
Indian	1	2	7	2	1
Black	14	8	10	25	2

16% wanted GM foods to be labelled, 12% said it should be displayed on posters in supermarkets, 13% wanted pamphlets available on supermarket counters, 8% wanted it published in newspapers, 32% shown on television, 14% broadcast on radio and 5% by other means.

Observations

The survey indicated that very few of the people interviewed knew anything about GM foods. Consumers still need educating when it comes to GM foods. The type of media used in such an education programme is important to reach all people who are exposed to different kinds of media. Workshops could also be held in different regions of the country to educate leaders and opinion formers.

During the survey, many people were surprised to learn that GM foods really exist. The following reasons were given as to why some of them would not buy GM foods:

- They are not safe for their health and the environment.
- They do not trust scientists.



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- Gene technology is against God's will.
- They feel they do not know enough.
- Scientists should not mess around with nature.
- They have faith in traditional methods.
- GM foods can be dangerous to long term health.
- It is against their religious beliefs.
- They are afraid that GM foods can kill them.
- GM foods are bad.

Other general comments were:

- They need to be educated on GM foods.
- The industry should introduce shops that only sell GM foods.
- Leave everything to nature and use the money spent on gene technology for research on other important issues such as HIV/AIDS.
- When educating consumers, all media should be used including the internet.
- Most consumers in the squatter camps need to be educated through workshops because they are not exposed to radio or television.