

The Right to Know About What We Grow

Questions Get Answered

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Melissa Diane Smith

October is Non-GMO Month, created by the Non-GMO Project (NonGMOProject.org) in 2010, so we asked Melissa Diane Smith, a nutritionist, speaker for the Institute for Responsible Technology and director of education for the GMO Free Project of Tucson, for some background and insight on the subject.

What are GMOs and why should we care?

GMOs are genetically modified organisms that don't occur in nature, but are created in a laboratory by forcing genes from one species into the DNA of another species. GMOs are used to make crops that are tolerant to herbicides that kill other plants and to make crops that have a little bit of insecticide in every bite.

That's a huge change in the way food is produced—the biggest change in the history of our planet—and those genetically modified foods now account for roughly 75 percent of the food sold in U.S. supermarkets. All of us should care because genetically modified foods have been allowed on the market without safety testing, without labeling and without most of our knowledge or consent in this country, largely because of heavy corporate influence.

That means we're all in a feeding experiment we didn't sign up for. Even worse, animal studies suggest there are serious health risks associated with eating genetically modified foods, including

infertility, immune system problems, accelerated aging, disruption of insulin and cholesterol regulation, gastrointestinal problems and organ damage.

Is there an upside to GMOs?

It's important for consumers to understand that GMOs do not benefit consumers in any way. They provide no better taste, no better nutrition and no lower price at the grocery store. GMOs only benefit the chemical companies that make the patented genetically modified seeds and their corresponding chemicals, usually herbicides such as RoundUp, which the genetically modified foods are tolerant to.

In other words, higher amounts of herbicides are sprayed on genetically modified herbicide-resistant crops. Other plants that haven't been treated die, but the genetically modified crops live. That practice led to an increase of herbicide use of 383 million more pounds used in the first 13 years after genetically modified crops were introduced and according to new data, an increase of 527 million more pounds of herbicides in the first 16 years. The companies that make those herbicides are the ones that are making the huge profits.

What percentage of GMO crops is produced in the U.S. compared to other countries and what are they?

I'm sorry to say that the United States grows by far the most genetically modified (GM) crops in the world. In 2011, it grew 69 million hectares of GM crops—more than double the amount grown in the next two countries, Brazil and Argentina, and more than the rest of the other countries growing GM crops in the world combined.

The five main GM foods that are hidden and so pervasive in many foods in our supermarket are soybeans, corn, canola, cottonseed and sugar from sugar beets. There also is a small percentage of zucchini and yellow crookneck squash that is genetically modified; alfalfa, used as feed for animals; and most of the papaya grown in Hawaii.

What is the Right to Know Genetically Engineered Food Act on the California ballot in November?

On election day this year, November 6, there will be a historic vote by voters in California on whether foods with genetically modified ingredients should be labeled in that state. It may not seem like what happens in California should have any bearing on us in Arizona or any other state, but in this case, that's not true.

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The California measure, if passed, would be the first law in the United States requiring the labeling of genetically modified foods, and that is likely to have far-reaching effects, likely ushering in labeling for the rest of the country. Studies consistently show that 90 percent of

Americans think genetically modified foods should be labeled, as they are in 50 other countries around the world. The California vote on this measure, known as Proposition 37, is critically important because California has the eighth largest economy in the world, and experts say it is unlikely for any company that sells food products nationally to have two separate labels—one for California and one for the rest of the country.

So, everyone who wants genetically modified foods labeled should make sure their friends and family members in California know about the importance of Proposition 37 in California and know that a yes vote will lead to clear labels on genetically modified foods and a greater ability for all of us to make informed grocery shopping choices.

What is the GMO Free Project of Tucson?

The GMO Free Project of Tucson is a nonprofit, all-volunteer group dedicated to informing the Tucson public and restaurants about genetically modified foods, their risks and how to avoid them. We have created an Eat GMO-Free Challenge that people can follow on our website and Facebook page. It provides a tip a day on how to avoid genetically modified foods every day this month.

We also started a Non-GMO Pure Food Dinner program. Pasco Kitchen & Lounge, The Tasteful Kitchen, Harvest Restaurant and Lavender Restaurant (in Green Valley) were the first restaurants in the Tucson area to agree to offer Non- GMO Pure Food Dinners. I'd like to give a shout-out to the owners and managers of those restaurants for taking a chance and being such pioneers in offering the types of Non-GMO Dinners that growing numbers of people want.

We consumers actually can create the kind of world we want more easily than we think. If each of us does our part by purchasing higher quality, non-GMO food, such as the food offered at these Pure Food Dinners, we can move the market to non-GMO fairly quickly.

Based on the new film, Genetic Roulette, that our GMO-Free group is screening this month, eating genetically modified foods also may promote inflammation and increased intestinal permeability, conditions linked to numerous health problems that are on the rise in humans. I encourage everyone who wants to understand the many risks and questions associated with genetically modified foods to come to one of several showings in Tucson this month. To learn about film screenings and how you can join us at one of our upcoming Pure Food meals, visit our website, gmofreetucson.org.

Sylvia Haskvitz, MA, RD, holds a bachelor's degree in nutrition and dietetics and a master's degree in speech and communication studies, with a focus on interpersonal and intercultural communication. She is a certified trainer with the Center for Nonviolent Communication and the author of Eat By Choice, Not By Habit (EatByChoice.net) and contributing author to Healing Our Planet, Healing Ourselves.

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