Genetically Modified Foods and Why You May Want to Avoid Them

By Dr. Alyssa Musgrove

Genetically modified organisms (GMOs), also referred to as “genetically engineered,” are live organisms whose genetic components have been manipulated artificially in a laboratory. GMOs are extremely common in food today. Statistics show more than 80 percent of the foods we eat daily are genetically modified or contain a genetically modified ingredient. Genetically modified foods are also fed to animals, so traces of residue can be found in our dairy, meat, fish and eggs.

GMOs allow plants to be grown in environments or soil that are naturally unreceptive, thereby making farming easier. Easier farming means more food can be mass-produced. Additionally, GMOs may require fewer pesticides, making it cheaper for large farming corporations. For example, some seeds have been engineered to be resistant to some bugs. But if bugs will no longer eat the foods, then why should we?

Unfortunately, there have been no studies or published research on the long-term effects of GMOs on humans. However, in 2011, there was a reviewed published article in *Environmental Science Europe* that showed widespread liver and kidney damage, as well as large tumor growth, in 19 mammals fed GMO corn and soybeans. A 10-year study in Norway found GMOs may cause obesity, digestive problems and also damage major organs like the liver, kidneys, pancreas, and genitals. Other possible health risks may include antibiotic resistance, endocrine (hormone) disruption, reproductive disorders, cancerous tumor growth, accelerated aging and increased allergies.

More than 60 countries have banned the production or sale of GMOs, including the European Union, Russia, China, Japan, Australia, and Brazil. Most countries that do allow GMOs have significant restrictions and require all genetically modified foods to be labeled, so you are aware of what you are consuming.

Unfortunately the American government approved GMOs based on studies conducted by the same companies that created them and profit from their sales. The United States produces more GMO crops than any other country, and does not require foods and ingredients to be labeled GMO. With the absence of mandatory labeling in our country, it can be difficult to make the best choices with food you are purchasing. Here are some simple tips to help you limit GMOs in your diet:

1. **Shop Organic**: By law, organic food must contain less then 5 percent genetically modified products. If you want to reduce your exposure to pesticides but do not have access to, cannot find, or afford an all-organic diet, shop the “Clean 15” or “Safe 16” – a list of conventionally-farmed produce that has the lowest pesticide load. The foods on these lists often have thick skins and include: onions, sweet peas, avocadoes, pineapples, mangoes, watermelon, grapefruit, kiwis and cantaloupes. Produce listed among the “Dirty Dozen” or “Tainted 12” include: apples, celery, strawberries, cucumbers, peaches, bell peppers, cherries, carrots, pears, potatoes, lettuce and kale. It is in your best interest to spend the extra money to purchase organic versions of those foods.
2. **Avoid the Big Offenders**: If you do not regularly purchase organic ingredients, start by reading packaged food labels in order to avoid the top 5 genetically modified crops: corn, canola, soybeans, sugar beets and papaya. If you are buying foods containing any of those crops, and the label doesn’t say “organic” or “non-GMO,” you can be assured the food is GMO.
3. **Swap Your Cooking Oil**: Swap out your vegetable or canola oil for olive oil, safflower oil or coconut oil, which are less likely to contain GMOs.
4. **Get Food from the Source**: Shop your local farmers market. Plant your own garden, or grow the most commonly used herbs inside your home.

Some food corporations are starting to take it upon themselves to eliminate harmful GMO ingredients in their products. Food companies like Chipotle and Panera Bread Company made the switch to non-GMO ingredients and also began labeling what is GMO for their customers. General Mills’ *Cheerios* no longer contains GMOs. At the end of 2015, Hershey Kisses and Hershey’s Milk Chocolate Bar became GMO-free. Trader Joe’s private labeled products contain no genetically modified ingredients.

While the availability of non-GMO food is somewhat limited, there is hope in knowing there are healthy options available. Bottom line: if it is not natural food put on this earth by God, then you may want to think twice before consuming it.