

IFIC survey: Consumers not concerned about biotechnology

FB News

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The International Food Information Council's annual assessment of consumer attitudes toward food shows that although more than half of all Americans steer clear of some food type or food ingredient, none mention biotech foods as something they are avoiding. When asked specifically about biotechnology, only 2 percent said they altered their behavior because of food biotechnology concerns.

In addition, nearly three-fourths of consumers are confident in the safety of the U.S. food supply. IFIC's survey is designed to track public awareness and perceptions of food biotechnology, identify concerns related to foods produced using biotechnology, measure the extent to which consumers change their behavior because of biotech foods and gauge which ag biotech benefits resonate with the public.

The assessment took place during June and July of 2006. For the first time in the survey's 11-year history, it was conducted over the Internet. The survey found that one-third of consumers were neutral and 18 percent were unsure in their opinions on food biotechnology.

Cheryl Toner, RD, IFIC director of health communications, emphasized that those who had an opinion were twice as likely to have a positive view (32 percent) than to have a negative perception (17 percent).

The survey indicated that most consumers had only a superficial knowledge of food biotechnology. Close to three-fourths of consumers heard "a little" about biotechnology, but only 8 percent heard "a lot." Many consumers (74 percent) were unaware that biotech foods were available in the supermarket. The 26 percent who were aware of their availability most often named "vegetables" as the biotech food found on store shelves.

According to IFIC's report, in light of this lack of awareness about food biotechnology, it was not surprising that 53 percent of consumers were unsure about potential benefits. However, consumers who had an opinion were twice as likely to believe biotechnology would provide benefits in the next few years (33 percent) than not (14 percent). The benefits most often cited were nutrition and quality.

"The more we tell people about biotechnology, the more positive they are," she said.

Learning about the health benefits of a biotech food product, such as increased omega-3 fatty acid content or reduced saturated fat content, had a significant impact on consumers' likelihood to buy the products, the survey found. Reduced

insect protection and pesticide use, as well as improved taste or freshness, would also compel consumers to purchase biotech products.

The survey also explored attitudes toward animal biotechnology. IFIC noted that animal biotech favorability shifted toward more positive impressions, with the “very favorable” rating increasing from 1 percent last year to 6 percent. Similarly, negative impressions have declined, from 16 percent in 2005 to 12 percent.

Thirty percent of consumers did not know enough to form an opinion, up from 24 percent, while 28 percent were neutral. The number of consumers who have read or heard “nothing at all” about animal biotechnology has increased for the second consecutive year.

Less than one-fifth of consumers gave animal cloning a favorable rating, while 56 percent gave it an unfavorable rating. More than half of adults were unlikely to buy foods from cloned animals or their offspring.

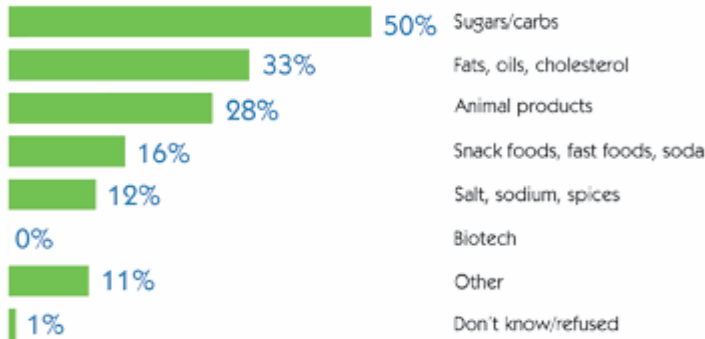
In terms of general food safety, 72 percent of consumers felt the U.S. food supply was safe. Among their top food safety concerns were microbial foodborne illness (36 percent) and improper handling (35 percent). Only 3 percent cited food biotechnology as a safety concern. “As we assess consumers’ attitudes over the years, they are continually confirming the public’s confidence in the U.S. food production system,” Toner said.

When asked what information they would like to see added to food nutrition labels, more than 80 percent of respondents said there’s nothing more they’d like included on the labels.

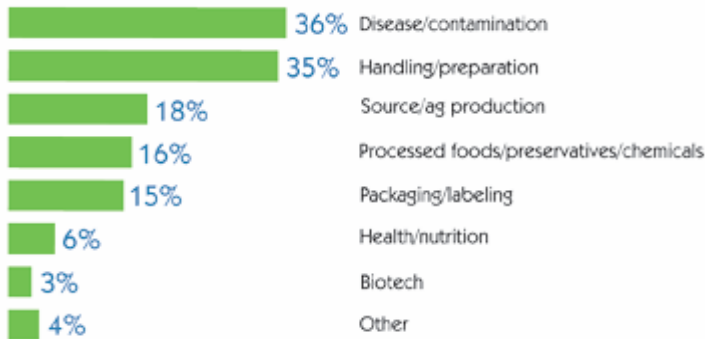
One percent named food biotechnology as information they’d like to see. IFIC noted that this finding was consistent with each year’s findings going back to 2001, when the question about labeling for biotechnology was first asked.

2006 U.S. CONSUMER ATTITUDINAL TRENDS

Thinking about your diet over the past few months, are there any foods or ingredients that you have avoided or eaten less of? What have you avoided?



What, if anything, are you concerned about when it comes to food safety?



Source: International Food Information Council