

Paying attention to food labels

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A majority of Americans say food labels influence their purchasing behavior, according to the latest Michigan State University Food Literacy and Engagement Poll.

The survey polled 2,048 Americans on a wide array of food topics. Among the 60 percent of survey respondents who say [food labels](#) have an impact on their buying decisions, there are striking differences along socioeconomic lines. Seventy-one percent of [consumers](#) in households earning \$75,000 or more annually pay close attention to food labels, compared to just 53 percent of those earning less than \$25,000.

Education level appears to influence attention to labels as well. Seventy-eight percent of college graduates look at food labels, while just 50 percent of those with a high school diploma or less say the same.

Sixty-five percent of Americans say they look for products labeled "natural" when shopping for food, the term most sought after among a list of options offered in the survey. "Low sodium" and "clean" follow with 59 percent and 58 percent, respectively. More than half of Americans also look for the term "organic" (53 percent) and "location of production" (50 percent) on their food labels. Others indicated they looked for "Non-GMO/GMO-free" (49 percent), "smart" (40 percent) or "gluten-free" (36 percent).

"It's notable that the most popular terms consumers search for on food labels are also the most ambiguous," said Sheril Kirshenbaum, co-director of the MSU Food Literacy and Engagement Poll. "Natural doesn't necessarily imply something is healthy. For example, arsenic occurs naturally, but we shouldn't eat it."

Each poll includes one question to measure general consumer understanding. This third edition of the survey revealed that 49 percent of consumers agree with the statement "all food with deoxyribonucleic acid should be labeled," even though all food contains genes. An additional 43 percent neither agree nor disagree, while just 8 percent disagree.

"Our polling continues to show that we in the scientific community have done a woeful job of conveying our message in a way that helps the public grasp key characteristics of the food system," said poll co-director Doug Buhler. "That is on us and it's time we take this gap more seriously and rethink our strategies to educate consumers."

Additional [survey](#) highlights include:

- Fifty-nine percent of Americans always or sometimes purchase organic food. The most common reason is "organic food is healthier."
- Fifty-one percent rarely (less than once a month) or never seek information about where their food was grown or how it was produced.
- Fifty-two percent of consumers trust academic scientists for information about the health and safety of [food](#). Forty-five percent trust government scientists and 30 percent trust industry scientists.

More information: For charts and more information about the MSU Food Literacy and Engagement Poll, visit canr.msu.edu/food/poll

Provided by Michigan State University

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