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The Consumer

## Information Not on the Label

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Advice on money and health.

If you want to know whether the bread you're about to buy was sweetened with corn syrup, you can check the label. The same is true if you're concerned about preservatives, caramel coloring or artificial flavoring. By law, all of these ingredients must be listed on food labels.

But not genetically modified organisms, or G.M.O.s. The Food and Drug Administration does not require clear identification and labeling of food products made with genetically engineered plants.

Most consumers want that to change. Some 93 percent of respondents to a New York Times survey in January 2013 said they wanted genetically modified ingredients identified, even though only about half said they would avoid G.M.O. products. More than 1.4 million people have signed the Center for Food Safety's petition urging the federal agency to require G.M.O. labeling. Last weekend, marches were held in dozens of cities to protest the introduction of genetically engineered products by Monsanto and other developers.

Vermont this month became the first state to require labeling of G.M.O.

foods, and Connecticut and Maine have passed similar laws, though they are contingent on other states enacting legislation. Food producers and developers of genetically modified plants and seeds poured millions of dollars into advertising in 2012 to defeat a California initiative requiring G.M.O. labeling, and they are pushing a federal bill that would bar states from requiring labeling. They insist the ingredients are safe and say there is no need for labels.

"Labeling space is very limited, and mandatory labeling would create an unnecessary stigma," said Claire Parker, spokeswoman for the Coalition for Safe Affordable Food, which represents businesses and organizations opposed to G.M.O. labeling. She and other industry representatives point to the F.D.A.'s determination in 1992 that there was no need for mandatory labeling of bioengineered foods because there were no "material" or "meaningful" differences between bioengineered and nonbioengineered foods.

Genetically engineered plants contain DNA from other animal or plant species that is intended to give them traits that are considered desirable by the manufacturers. One of the more recent innovations is an apple that does not turn brown after it is sliced. Another is a strawberry that withstands freezing. Many of the plants have been engineered to survive being sprayed with weed killers; some even produce their own pesticides.

Advocates of labeling point out that the F.D.A. has elaborate disclosure requirements for all kinds of foods. Labels on orange juice, for instance, must inform customers whether it is fresh or made from concentrate, and producers are barred from using the term "juice" if the drink is not 100 percent juice. (Products containing less must be called a "beverage," "cocktail" or "drink".)

The agency even regulates the use of terms like "fresh," "frozen," "fresh frozen," "frozen fresh" and "quickly frozen" on labels for products like peas.

"The F.D.A. decided that the difference between fresh peas and frozen peas was a 'material' difference to the consumer," said Jean Halloran, director of food policy initiatives at Consumers Union, which supports labeling of genetically modified foods. "This stuff is as different as frozen peas and nonfrozen peas, if not more so." Agency scientists have expressed concerns about new genetically engineered plant products, wondering whether the new plants have the same levels of important nutrients as non-engineered varieties, for instance, and whether they might contain toxins, new allergens or unapproved food additives.

But unlike the approval process required for new drugs and even many food additives like artificial sweeteners, the review process for new G.M.O. plant foods is voluntary. Producers are asked only to consult with the F.D.A. The agency "does not conduct a comprehensive scientific review of data generated by the developer," according to F.D.A. documents. Officials rely on producers to do their own safety and nutritional assessments, and they review summaries of those assessments.

"We recognize and appreciate the interest that some consumers have expressed in knowing whether a food was produced using genetic engineering," said Theresa Eisenman, an F.D.A. spokeswoman. "Food from genetically engineered plants must meet the same requirements, including safety requirements, as foods from traditionally bred plants."

It is not clear whether genetically engineered salmon, which is going through a different review process than G.M.O. plants, will be labeled when it gets to market. An agency official said special labeling would only be required if the F.D.A. determines the food differs "materially" from comparable foods — for example, if it has a different nutritional profile.

Shoppers who want to know whether they're purchasing genetically engineered foods do have a few options. For starters, there is a good chance that any product with soybeans, corn, sugar beets (often used for sweetening) and canola (or canola oil) has G.M.O.s., since genetically modified versions of these crops are so widely planted in the United States.

On the other hand, certified organic produce carrying the green and white circular "U.S.D.A. organic" seal cannot be genetically modified, and organic livestock must be fed only organic ingredients. While processed foods with multiple ingredients can be labeled organic if at least 95 percent of the content is organic, none of the non-organic 5 percent can be G.M.O.

And a growing number of food producers that don't use genetically modified ingredients in their products are seeking certification by the Non-G.M.O. Project. They carry a "Non-G.M.O." label with a logo of a red butterfly on a blade of grass.