

Labelling of Genetically Modified Food in Hong Kong

corn (genetically modified)



soya beans (genetically modified)



potato (genetically modified)



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What are Genetically Modified (GM) foods?

GM food refers to food or food ingredient that is, or is derived from, an organism in which genetic material has been modified using modern biotechnology. Without knowing the exact mechanism, farmers centuries ago have made use of various breeding methods to produce grain and plants which were bigger, tastier or easier to grow. Nowadays, scientists are able to identify and modify some genes controlling specific characteristics of organisms by means of modern biotechnology.

What is the local situation about labelling of GM food?

In order to enhance consumers' knowledge and right to make an informed choice on GM food, the Centre for Food Safety (CFS) has issued a set of guidelines for labelling of GM food to facilitate the trade to provide truthful information on GM food. Although the guidelines are advisory in nature and have no legal effect, we encourage the trade to adopt these guidelines to standardise the information for the consumers.

Why does the Government only introduce voluntary labelling scheme?

When deciding the regulatory framework on GM food labelling, a number of factors, including public concern and trade impact, have to be considered. Having taking into account the lack of international consensus and the cost impact to the trade as well as consumers' increasing demand for more product information, the Government considers it a pragmatic move to introduce a voluntary labelling scheme for GM food at this stage.

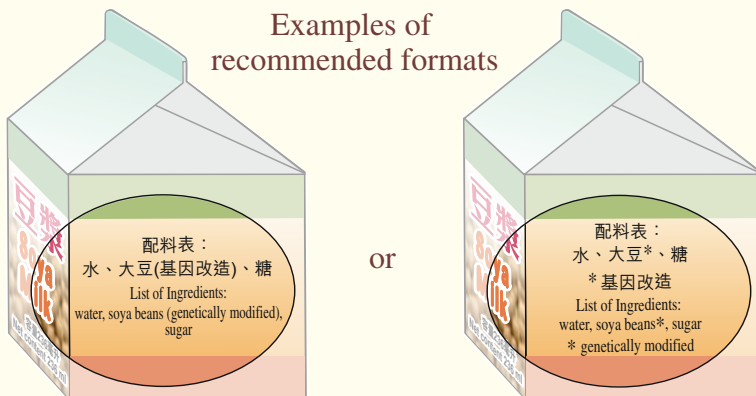
What types of GM food are recommended to be labelled ?

Prepackaged food items with 5% or more GM materials in their respective food ingredient(s) are recommended to be labelled as “genetically modified”. Additional declaration on the food label is recommended when significant modifications that have taken place under the following conditions:

- (a) the composition or nutritional value is significantly different from that of its conventional counterpart;
- (b) the level of anti-nutritional factors or natural toxicants is significantly different from those in its conventional counterpart;
- (c) the presence of an allergen that is not found in its conventional counterpart;
- (d) the intended use of the food is significantly different from that of its conventional counterpart; or
- (e) an animal gene has been introduced into food of plant origin.

How does the label of GM food look like?

Food items with 5% or more GM materials in their respective food ingredient(s) are recommended to be labelled as “genetically modified” in brackets following the name of the food/food ingredient in the “List of Ingredients” or in a prominently displayed footnote to the “List of Ingredients”. Additional words about the changed characteristics are recommended to be provided in conjunction with the name of the food/food ingredients if there are significant modifications that have taken place.



How do those non-GM foods be labelled?

The existing legislation requires that members of the trade should not falsely describe their food products. Since there is possibility of unintentional mixing of GM and non-GM crops, a truly “GM free” status is very difficult to attain. To avoid misleading, absolute terms such as “GM free”, “GMO free”, “free from GM ingredients” or similar labels are not recommended to be used. If a food product is labelled as non-GM or other similar declarations, the manufacturers need to have documentation to substantiate that their products are made from non-GM source, or all ingredients in their products are derived from non-GM source for those products containing multiple ingredients.

Should I avoid food containing GM ingredients?

Labelling of GM food aims to address the issue of consumer's right to know, but it does not imply that the foods labelled as GM food are less safe than the conventional ones. Moreover, the World Health Organization stated that GM foods currently available in the international market have passed safety assessments and are not likely to present risks for human health. To date, none of the GM foods in the market have been proved as unfit for human consumption.

The Guidelines as well as other information on GM food are available in the webpage of the Centre for Food Safety www.cfs.gov.hk.