

VARYING LEVELS OF CONCERN ABOUT FOOD TECHNOLOGIES

Levels of concern about new technologies used in food production vary substantially across the public, with those who are less familiar with their terminology or use being the most wary. The latest NatCen British Social Attitudes report measures attitudes towards food production by describing five innovative but established ingredients and processes. Asking people how concerned they would be about eating something prepared in that way, the results show that:

- One in five (22%) of people are 'very concerned' about the use of gases in bags of ready-to-eat salad leaves. One in ten (10%) are very concerned about the high-pressure treatment of fresh fruit juice, and a similar proportion (11%) about the use of radiation in microwaves.
- In all but one case (the use of gases in salad bags), over half are not 'very' or 'at all' concerned.
- For example, three quarters (75%) are not 'very' or 'at all' concerned about adding ingredients that lower levels of cholesterol to food (used in products like Benecol).

Concern about food products developed using innovative technologies is strongly linked with levels of familiarity and knowledge:

- A third (31%) of people are concerned about eating a food prepared using a microwave. But when the radiation process is described in exactly the same way, but using the term 'magnetron' (a less well-known term for a microwave), over half (57%) say they would be concerned.
- Women, people with low levels of knowledge about food technology, older people and people with fewer educational qualifications are most likely to express concern. Less than a third (30%) of graduates have high levels of concern, compared with over half (55%) of people with no qualifications.

Opposition to genetically modified (GM) foods has fallen, although attitudes remain ambivalent:

- In 1999, nearly three in five (57%) *disagreed* with the view that "in general, the advantages of GM foods outweigh any dangers"; now, only just under a third (31%) do so.
- This is not because public approval of GM has risen: instead, more people say they neither agree nor disagree with the statement, up from around one in five (22%) in 1999 to two in five (39%) now.

Elizabeth Clery, author, comments:

'Attitudes to any emerging food technology seem destined to be initially wary, before familiarity increases through public debate and more widespread use of the products.'

ENDS

This summarises 'Food for thought: attitudes to innovative food technologies' by Elizabeth Clery, in British Social Attitudes: the 26th Report, published by Sage for NatCen.

Notes to Editors

- 1 **British Social Attitudes: the 26th Report** is published on Tuesday 26th January, 2010 by SAGE, price £50.00. It is edited by Alison Park, John Curtice, Katarina Thomson, Miranda Phillips, Elizabeth Clery and Sarah Butt. SAGE is at <http://www.uk.sagepub.com/booksProdDesc.nav?prodId=Book234304&series=Series30&>.
- 2 The report includes two additional chapters not covered by this press release. Findings from these chapters, on religion, were released earlier in the year.
- 3 British findings are from the British Social Attitudes survey, with the exception of the chapter by Andy Ross and Amanda Sacker, which also uses data from the British Household Panel Study, and the chapter by Rossy Bailey, Elizabeth Fuller and Rachel Ormston, which also uses data from the Scottish Social Attitudes survey and the Health Survey for England. Findings that compare Britain with other countries are taken from the European Social Survey (www.europeansocialsurvey.org) or the International Social Survey Programme (www.issp.org).
- 4 The British Social Attitudes survey series has been conducted annually since 1983. The 2008 survey consisted of 4,486 interviews with a representative, random sample of people in Britain.
- 5 The survey is funded by charitable and government sources. The questions in the 2008 survey were funded by the following government Departments: Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (now Business, Innovation and Skills); Children, Schools and Families; Health; Transport; and Work and Pensions. Other funders came from: the Economic and Social Research Council; the Food Standards Agency; the Gatsby Charitable Foundation; the Hera Trust; the John Templeton Foundation; the Leverhulme Trust; and NORFACE.
- 6 NatCen, Britain's largest independent social research organisation, aims to promote a better-informed society through high quality social research (www.natcen.ac.uk).

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