

# Say No to GMO!

Raidah Shah Idil talks to Atika Irfan who explains why she is trying her best to avoid feeding her family with GMO food.



I first met Atika Irfan at a weekend Permaculture workshop run by Rhamis Kent in KL, Malaysia. She is a wife and a mother of three and a director of Basatin Filahah Permaculture. I admire her commitment to providing a non-GMO diet for her family. Here's what she had to share with me.

## 1. What is the definition of a non-GMO diet?

This is a diet that does not contain any genetically modified food in any form, including genetically engineered salmon fish; grains, like corn; soybean and veggies, such as potato, eggplant and tomato. Animal meat raised on GMOs (genetically modified organisms) and milk from these animals should also be excluded.

## 2. Why is a GMO diet harmful for ourselves and our children?

GMOs are outright dangerous. Just as nature is designed to respond to what is available, our DNA responds to changes that it is exposed to. Our DNA will replicate itself with the available material and if that material is faulty, then the copy made is a faulty one. The genes inserted into GMOs won't necessarily get attached at desired locations on the host DNA and when RNA (a decoder of DNA which makes all kinds of protein encoded in our DNA) makes protein from that faulty DNA, it makes novel proteins that have never existed in our bodies or in nature.

As a result, we have all sorts of inflammations in the body. The inflammation inside our bodies is like a civil war inside our bodies; the body is at war with itself. Take the example of the Bt gene inserted into GMOs. This Bt gene produces toxins that make us sick. When we eat GMOs, the Bt gene gets into the microbes in our guts and turns these microbes into Bt toxin factories. These toxins punch molecular holes in our gut and, as a result, things that should not get into our blood then enter into our blood and create all sorts of allergies.

Unfortunately, we feed GMOs to our animals in the form of corn cake and soya cake (a grain cake is made from the leftover compressed grains when oil has been extracted). Just as the GMOs affect our DNA, they affect animals in the same way, so their DNA also changes. So now we are looking at both animal protein and plant-based food damaging us at a DNA level and causing inflammation in our body.

When lab rats were fed GMOs, they developed cancers, immune system problems, heart problems, digestive system problems and reproductive problems. The reproductive problems came in with the third generation of consumers eating GMOs. GMOs were introduced in our diets in the late nineties so our children are the ones who have been exposed to GMOs since they were born. For example, our children consumed milk formulas made from soya and milk from animals fed on GMO. The damage from GMOs will start showing in future generations growing up consuming them.

GMOs were designed to survive the chemicals sprayed on them in the form of pesticides, herbicides and fungicides. These chemicals are chelators and are designed to change nutrients and minerals in soil in a way that it is not available to weeds, but also the plants grown for food. So plants grow without these essential minerals/nutrients, creating nutrient deficient food. When animals eat this

nutrient deficient food, they too become nutrition deficient, get sick and have a higher chance of premature death. There is well-documented evidence that animals fed on GMOs long enough died due to manganese deficiency. So when we eat plants and animals deficient in nutrition, we also become sick and have higher chances of premature death or chronic disease.

## 3. What are some practical steps on how to create a non-GMO diet for our homes?

The best answer is to grow your own food as much as possible. Join a community garden or an urban farm in cities if you don't have enough space. This saves a lot of money and is healthy for you and the planet. If you don't have that option of growing food for yourself, then buy organic and compost grown food. Organic is GMO-free and pesticide-free. The compost grown available in Malaysia is safe, as far as I know.

Start to wean your family off GMOs. Make a plan. Substitute one product at a time. Read labels on all food products. Unfortunately Malaysia does not have a policy that allows us to know if GMOs have been added to a product, so buy only organic products. That's the only way to be sure. Avoid all products that have GMO ingredients, e.g oils, flours, breads, cakes, cookies, potato chips.

## 4. What challenges have you faced in implementing a non-GMO diet for yourself and your family?

When I decided that we have to change to a non-GMO diet, the biggest challenge was overcoming the mindset of my family - why should we spend so much on food? I had to explain that we were getting sick from eating "normal" food. When we get sick from it, we have to spend more money treating diseases and then waste time and energy when sick. The heartache involved when a child is sick is enough to make me eat GMO-free food.

We started with leafy greens and slowly changed most items to organic and non-GMO food. We have stopped eating meat every day and only eat chicken once a week. The price of organic food is my biggest challenge, so I decided to grow my own food as much as I can. I live in a terrace house and am experimenting with what kinds of food I can grow. So far yams and kangkong (water spinach) have been the easiest to grow. Herbs are great too.

## 5. Do you have anything else you'd like to share?

My mum has health issues and one of her monthly medicines costs RM500 (approximately £100). My dad is able to afford this. I am not sure if my husband will be able to afford this kind of money just for one person so, all things considered, the organic and compost grown food is cheaper than getting sick and spending money in hospitals and on medicine. It is easier to grow a food garden than to watch a loved one fall sick and not be themselves or healthy and happy. I have seen too many sick people and I know exactly what goes on in the health industry because my father is a doctor.

*Raidah Shah Idil is a writer, poet and creative instructor based in KL, Malaysia. She is the author of Finding Jamilah and The Story of Yusuf. Her writing and poetry have been published in The Elephant Journal, The Feminist Wire, Lip Mag, Daily Life and Venture Beat.*