New Disease Threats Follow Trump Administration's Health Program Cuts

Flesh-eating bacteria, screwworm, malaria, Ebola and hantavirus are among the emerging domestic and global threats that concern health experts.

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As beachgoers flock to water during the busy July Fourth weekend, danger could be lurking in some areas.

Researchers this spring discovered flesh-eating bacteria in water in several coastal locations across New York's Long Island, and town officials in the Hamptons vacation destination posted an alert about the findings. Eight people in Florida have been infected this year, and Mississippi health officials in June urged people to take precautions.

About 1 in 5 people infected by the bacteria die, sometimes within a day or two of becoming ill, according to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention fact sheet. The bacteria, Vibrio vulnificus, can enter open wounds and cause tissue death and systemic sepsis.

"Many people with Vibrio vulnificus infection can get seriously ill and need intensive care or limb amputation," the CDC says.

The risk of such public threats is mounting because climate change is expanding the territory of certain pathogens, but researchers say there's another concern. The Trump administration has cut investments in programs and agencies that prevent, track, and respond to health hazards the federal government is now confronting.

Consider the reemergence of screwworm, which can infest and kill livestock, in the U.S. in June. The U.S. Department of Agriculture lost 18% of its workforce in the first six months of 2025, according to a report from the USDA's Office of Inspector General, and the agency's winnowed-down inspection service is helping lead the response to the parasite.

Or malaria. A freeze on foreign aid disrupted international malaria prevention efforts, and new federal guidance in May warned that the U.S. is vulnerable to the reintroduction of the infectious disease.

And when it comes to Vibrio, the Trump administration began removing hundreds of deep-sea instruments that monitor ocean waters and yield data that helps predict conditions that can allow

the bacteria to flourish. Researchers have used the data to study Vibrio, which can multiply rapidly when water temperatures and salinity increase.

“It is important to track coastal temperatures, and that will relate to the distributions of Vibrio,” said Christopher Gobler, a professor in the School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences at New York’s Stony Brook University, though he added that there are also other sources of data for researchers.

The Trump administration reversed its plan to dismantle the ocean monitoring system following bipartisan opposition to the effort in Congress.

But it’s still curtailing Vibrio surveillance. The life-threatening species that’s found in water can also sicken or kill people who eat contaminated seafood, such as raw oysters infected with the bacteria. And infections from Vibrio vulnificus linked to consuming raw or undercooked shellfish have been increasing as the presence of other pathogens in food decrease.

Since 1995, 10 states have participated in a federal program called the Foodborne Disease Active Disease Surveillance Network, or FoodNet. The program, with the CDC, monitors and track cases of foodborne illness caused by eight specific pathogens, including Vibrio. But last year the Trump administration stopped requiring those states to report on all but two pathogens, which means states no longer must report cases to the CDC.

Federal officials deny the moves are putting Americans at risk, saying the CDC continues to monitor these pathogens through other national surveillance systems to ensure ongoing visibility into disease trends and outbreaks.

Meanwhile, some former health leaders say the ramifications of sweeping cuts to health agencies and global prevention programs are becoming more apparent, undermining U.S. response efforts and initiatives that aim to safeguard the country from diseases.

“We are letting down defenses that were necessary to protect against microbial threats,” said Tom Frieden, a former CDC director who is now president and chief executive of Resolve to Save Lives, which works to stop preventable disease. “Instead of protecting, we’re doing the opposite.”

Do Limited Resources Mean Higher Risks?

The administration defends its actions, including massive layoffs at government health agencies, as necessary to eliminate wasteful spending.

The Department of Health and Human Services “is advancing the most significant public health reforms in a generation focused on prevention, accountability, scientific transparency, and better health outcomes,” agency spokesperson Emily Hilliard said in an email. “The Department is putting American families at the center of public health decision-making.”

Evidence suggests health risks are rising even as the Trump administration pulls back on resources for research, detection, and response.

Early in his administration, President Donald Trump opted to freeze and review work on global health programs. Trump's cost-reduction effort, led by billionaire Elon Musk, also dismantled the U.S. Agency for International Development.

As a result, work was disrupted on the President's Malaria Initiative, a George W. Bush-era program aimed at combating malaria in hard-hit countries that is credited with saving more than 11 million lives. USAID had invested more than $9 billion in the program since 2005.

In addition, 80% of USAID grants for global malaria programs were targeted for termination, according to KFF, an independent research group that includes KFF Health News. The report didn't include data on the total value of those specific malaria grants.

And the spending freeze halted research for more effective malaria vaccines. The administration dissolved the CDC's Division of Parasitic Diseases and Malaria, shuffling staffers to other divisions and interrupting work on the disease. HHS didn't respond to an email asking how many staff members had been moved.

The life-threatening infectious disease spread by mosquitos was eradicated from the U.S. in 1951. But the CDC's updated guidance on investigating domestic cases warned in May that "the country remains susceptible to malaria reintroduction."

An outbreak in 2023 resulted in 10 people in Arkansas, Florida, Maryland, and Texas becoming infected locally, and mosquitoes capable of transmitting malaria are found throughout most of the country.

"The majority of U.S. residents lack protective immunity against malaria, rendering persons susceptible to severe illness and death if infected," the CDC said in the May report.

HHS declined to comment on any of the specific cuts but said the CDC works with domestic and international partners to reduce the burden of malaria and prevent its reestablishment in the U.S.

It's not just cuts to funding that are raising health risks, say researchers and former health officials. Significant staffing cuts mean there are fewer people working on preventing or tracking diseases, they say.

"Yes, the programs have been cut in terms of reduction in staff, but I would say, equally important, you have reductions in expertise," said Jeanne Marrazzo, CEO of the Infectious Diseases Society of America. "It's irreplaceable."

Screwworm is a species of parasitic blowfly producing larvae that can enter open wounds and devour tissue, infecting people and animals. Like malaria, it has long been eliminated in the U.S., and disease monitoring efforts have been key to keeping it out.

The cuts at USAID stripped more than $300 million from the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization, which focuses on global food security and the monitoring of zoonotic diseases such

as screwworm.

In the wake of the administration's cost-cutting initiatives, more than 20,000 employees are gone from the USDA, which develops and implements agriculture policy and provides resources to producers of livestock vulnerable to the parasite.

On June 3, the first new case of screwworm in the U.S. was confirmed, and there have now been more than a dozen animals infected with parasite. An expanding outbreak could devastate the cattle industry.

Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins has denied that any staffing cuts during the Trump administration have led to screwworm's return. Instead, she has blamed the Biden administration, saying it didn't do enough to prevent reintroduction into the U.S. Rollins said on X that "uncontrolled illegal migration" under the previous Biden administration was partly to blame, providing no evidence.

The USDA did not respond to an email seeking comment.

Ashish Jha, a doctor who served as the White House COVID response coordinator during the Biden administration, said there's no truth to the claim that immigrants lacking legal status have brought screwworm into the U.S.

Investments in tracking and combating diseases have suffered, he said, because HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is prioritizing the prevention of chronic disease at the expense of efforts to curtail infectious disease.

"Who doesn't want a healthier country? It sounds great, but it's kind of a bait and switch," Jha said. "They're doing the opposite. They're letting down our defenses that are necessary to protect us against microbial threats."

HHS' Hilliard disagreed, saying Kennedy's actions are making the agency more effective.

"Secretary Kennedy is delivering that reform by streamlining operations, reducing redundancies, and returning HHS to pre-pandemic staffing levels," she said. "At the same time, he is dismantling policies and incentives that contributed to a nationwide chronic disease epidemic."

Surveillance Gaps

Jha pointed to Trump's decision to withdraw the U.S. from the World Health Organization, which coordinates global responses to public health issues and crises, and to the dismantling of USAID.

The pullback has had implications for the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo, aid workers say.

Without the same amount of funding from USAID, the International Rescue Committee, which

partners to deliver front-line health, surveillance, and outbreak preparedness activities in Congo, curtailed its programs.

“Funding cuts have left the region dangerously exposed,” Heather Reoch Kerr, IRC’s country director for Congo, said in a statement.

The outbreak is roughly 7,000 miles away, but its spread has the U.S. on alert, with stepped-up surveillance and entry restrictions on airline travelers. Federal officials have said that the dismantling of USAID hasn’t hampered detection or response.

“The U.S. government continues to move aggressively to contain the Ebola outbreak at its source in order to protect the American people and prevent further international spread,” the State Department said in a May 23 statement.

Trump’s decision to disengage with the WHO was criticized by health leaders following a hantavirus outbreak this spring on a cruise ship that had set sail from Argentina. Some said the federal response was too slow, and they questioned why the president suggested creating a costly new global disease surveillance system rather than sticking with the WHO — especially, they say, when the U.S. is cutting back on the surveillance programs it already has.

The federal government has tracked Vibrio cases as part of the FoodNet program, which aims in part to identify and curtail outbreaks. Reporting on cases of Vibrio is now optional.

Close to half of the cases of foodborne illness caused by Vibrio vulnificus have resulted in death, and some within 24 hours after consumption of tainted shellfish such as raw oysters. The bacteria can multiply rapidly, leading to septic shock and blistering skin lesions. The pathogen is becoming increasingly resistant to antibiotics.

The CDC estimates that about 80,000 cases of Vibrio infection occur annually, with infections from the most severe species, Vibrio vulnificus, steadily rising. Over the past five years, that species has led to 429 cases due to infections of open wounds and 135 cases from contaminated food.

“The more surveillance you get, you can connect the dots,” said Bill Marler, a Seattle-area food safety lawyer. “If a tree falls in the woods and you don’t hear it, did the tree fall? It’s easier not to report diseases. Then they can say, ‘Look at how safe our food supply is.’”

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