

What RFK Jr. Might Face in His Nomination Hearings This Week

Senators are expected to question Kennedy about his views on vaccines, COVID, HIV, abortion and much more.

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President Donald Trump has nominated Robert F. Kennedy Jr., an environmental lawyer with no formal medical or public health expertise, as secretary of Health and Human Services. Two Senate committees will question Kennedy this week on how his disproven views of science and medicine qualify him to run the \$1.7 trillion, 80,000-employee federal health system.

Here are four considerations for lawmakers on the Senate Finance and Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions committees, which will host Kennedy for questioning on Wednesday and Thursday, respectively:

1) Kennedy's unconventional health claims.

[For decades](#), Kennedy has advocated for health-related ideas that are scientifically disproven or controversial. He created and was paid hundreds of thousands of dollars by Children's Health Defense, a group that champions the [false idea](#) that vaccines cause autism and other chronic diseases and has sued to take vaccines off the market. Kennedy has said COVID vaccines are the [deadliest in history](#), antidepressants [lead children to commit](#) mass shootings, environmental contaminants may [cause people to become trans](#), and HIV is [not the only cause](#) of AIDS.

He also pushes the use of products that regulators consider dangerous, such as raw milk, and for broader use of some medicines, such as ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine, to treat conditions without Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval. He says public health agencies oppose their use only because of regulatory capture by big drug and food interests.

"He believes you can avoid disease if you have a healthy immune system. He sees vaccines and antibiotics as toxins," said Paul Offit, director of the Vaccine Education Center at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

Top Trump health nominees — Kennedy, Marty Makary for FDA commissioner, Jay Bhattacharya for National Institutes of Health (NIH) director, and former U.S. Rep. Dave Weldon for Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) director — are generally disdainful of the agencies they'll be

leading, Offit said.

“They think they are going to go into office, pull back the curtain, find all this bad stuff, and reveal it to the American public,” he said.

During a measles epidemic in 2019 and 2020 that [killed 83 people](#), mostly children, in Samoa, Kennedy, as chairman of Children’s Health Defense, warned the country’s prime minister against measles vaccination. This behavior alone “is disqualifying” for an HHS nominee, said Georges Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Association.

Equally problematic, in Benjamin’s view, was Kennedy’s legal effort in 2021 to get the COVID vaccine pulled from the market. “He can’t say he’s not anti-vax,” Benjamin said. “He wasn’t following the evidence.”

A Kennedy spokesperson did not respond to a request for comment.

2) Kennedy’s chances appear good, despite opposition.

Kennedy’s nomination has emerged in a moment when Trump is on a roll and mistrust of public health and medical authority in the wake of the pandemic has created an opening for people with unorthodox views of science to seize the reins of the country’s health system.

After former Fox News personality Pete Hegseth was confirmed as Defense secretary last week despite his controversial qualifications for the job and stark warnings from former top military brass, many Washington observers think RFK Jr. is going to be hard to defeat. In a meeting on the Hill with Democratic senators and their aides last week, Offit said, “the feeling was that he would likely be confirmed.”

[Trump has demanded](#) that Republican senators line up behind his nominees and has so far succeeded. It’s thought that Sens. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and Susan Collins of Maine could oppose Kennedy, based on their opposition to Hegseth. Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), the other Hegseth “nay” vote, is a polio survivor who has not spoken publicly about Kennedy but said in December that opposing “proven cures” was dangerous. Other senators whose Kennedy votes are said to be in question include Sen. Bill Cassidy (R-La.), the HELP Committee chair, a physician who gave a lukewarm response after meeting Kennedy.

Others have reported that Sens. [Cory Booker](#) (D-N.J.), who shares Kennedy’s concern with the spread of obesity and chronic illness, and [Sheldon Whitehouse](#) (D-R.I.), who attended law school with Kennedy, might vote for him. Neither senator’s office responded to a request for comment. Advancing American Freedom, a conservative advocacy group founded by former Vice President Mike Pence, has [fought Kennedy’s nomination](#) with a major ad buy.

3) The hearings are going to be heated.

Democratic senators are coming with plenty of ammunition. Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) sent

Kennedy a [34-page letter containing 175 questions](#) on everything from his anti-vaccine statements and actions to his waffling positions on abortion to his stances on Medicare, drug prices, and the cause of AIDS.

While public health and medical groups did not coordinate with Pence's conservative organization, questions about Kennedy's earlier stance in support of abortion rights could raise hackles on the GOP side of the aisle. Although his group is far from Pence on reproductive rights, Benjamin said, "if it helps derail him, I hope some senators are listening to Pence. Any shelter in a storm."

"The hearings are going to be very difficult for him because he's told a web of untruths as he's marched across the offices," said Leslie Dach, executive chair of Protect Our Care, a Democratic-aligned advocacy group.

Public opinion reflects leering of Kennedy on health, though not excessively. In a poll released Tuesday by KFF, 43% of respondents said they trusted him to make the right health recommendations. About 81% of Republicans in the poll said they trusted Kennedy — almost as many as trust their own doctor.

4) What happens if Kennedy takes office.

At the NIH, FDA, and other federal health agencies, nervous scientists speak of early retirement or jumping to industry should Kennedy and his agency heads take office.

The pharmaceutical industry has kept quiet on the nomination, as has the American Medical Association. Many patient advocacy groups are worried, but wary of creating friction with an administration they can't ignore or defeat.

Kennedy's comments on AIDS — suggesting that gay men's use of stimulants, rather than the HIV virus, were its cause — are troubling to Carl Schmid, executive director of the HIV+Hepatitis Policy Institute. But "I don't know if he's going to get confirmed or not," he said. "If he does, we look forward to working with him and educating him."

At the J.P. Morgan Healthcare conference earlier this month, Emma Walmsley, CEO of GSK, a leading vaccine maker, said she'd "wait and see what the facts are" before predicting what Kennedy would do. Vaccines, she noted, are "not our biggest business."

GSK is one of a handful of vaccine makers remaining on the U.S. market. That number could shrink further if the Trump administration and Congress undo a 1986 law that provided legal protection for vaccine makers — as Kennedy has advocated.

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