



Cyclospora Boosts Fears That Worse Foodborne Outbreaks Are Ahead

Food safety experts say the situation could get worse because the Trump administration wants to push more routine food inspections to the states and further reduce the number of federal staffers that handle investigations and inspections.

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The next foodborne illness outbreak could be much worse.

That's the concern of food safety leaders across the United States who are raising alarms over federal cuts they say have made it harder to detect and stop the spread of foodborne illnesses, such as the recent outbreaks of cyclospora, which has [sickened thousands](#) in dozens of states. And they're especially worried the next pathogen will be much more deadly.

Food safety in the U.S. is monitored by a piecemeal system of state and federal agencies. That network is in charge of detecting, investigating, and stopping outbreaks of foodborne illnesses. Key to the system is the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's FoodNet program, created after four children died from E. coli in hamburgers in the early 1990s. States participating in the program, officially called the Foodborne Diseases Active Surveillance Network, contact labs to get case data that can signal when a problem is emerging.

But in President Donald Trump's second term, his administration has slashed billions of dollars in public health funding and fired thousands of workers at federal health agencies. It has also curtailed FoodNet, stopping the program's mandatory tracking of cyclospora and five other pathogens that together kill hundreds of people in the U.S. each year.

"You're basically allowing for outbreaks to continue without being figured out. Invariably more people will get sick," said Bill Marler, a Seattle-area food safety lawyer and advocate who has filed lawsuits against Taco Bell on behalf of people who allege they were sickened by cyclospora after eating there.

Under the changes to the FoodNet surveillance system, the 10 participating states — meant to represent a cross section of the broader population — no longer have to report cases of listeria, for example. That bacteria [kills as many as 30%](#) of people who are diagnosed with it.

Complications from listeria infections can include convulsions, miscarriage, and sepsis that damages organs. It's much more rare than the type of E. coli bacteria still required to be tracked

by FoodNet, but [almost 95%](#) of people infected with listeria wind up hospitalized. Listeria infections result in an estimated [170 to 260 deaths each year](#), according to numbers from the CDC and the Food and Drug Administration.

“It’s very hard to identify listeria outbreaks,” said Neal Fortin, the director of the Institute of Food Laws and Regulations at Michigan State University. Seeing it cut from FoodNet’s mandatory surveillance “really does disturb me,” he said.

Thirty-three people died and a pregnant woman had a miscarriage in 2011 after [consuming cantaloupe contaminated](#) with listeria. The FDA identified the cause in [less than two weeks](#).

States participating in FoodNet also no longer have to report illnesses caused by campylobacter, a bacteria often contracted from raw and undercooked poultry that afflicts an estimated 1.5 million people each year. The bacteria sickened about 60 people in Idaho this year in an outbreak linked to raw milk — a product Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. [has championed](#), even though pasteurization kills harmful bacteria.

HHS denies that the changes to FoodNet or Trump administration staffing cuts have elevated the risk that future outbreaks will be harder to identify and stop.

“FDA investigators were not affected by staffing changes or force reductions, and the FY 2027 President’s Budget proposes a \$33 million increase for food safety activities,” HHS spokesperson Emily Hilliard said in an email. And the CDC never stopped monitoring illnesses caused by cyclospora, she said.

The CDC has other, passive surveillance systems, but they rely on states to report problems.

“There’s no requirement of how long it takes them to do that,” said Barbara Kowalczyk, the director of the Institute for Food Safety and Nutrition Security at George Washington University.

And the FDA meets only a fraction of the number of inspections mandated by Congress. The FDA [hasn’t met its mandated targets](#) for domestic and foreign inspections since 2018, according to a report early last year by the Government Accountability Office.

Food safety [inspections of manufacturers](#) by the FDA plummeted from 10,641 facilities in 2011 to about 4,500 a decade later. The agency had [432 investigators](#) for domestic and foreign inspections in 2024, according to a GAO report.

That was before the Trump administration [cut 3,500 jobs at the FDA](#) in a push to reduce federal spending.

Now, food safety leaders say the situation could get worse, because the Trump administration wants to push more routine food inspections to the states and further reduce the number of federal staffers that handle investigations and inspections.

State health departments are already overburdened from federal funding cuts and staffing shortages, forcing some to reduce or halt prevention programs so they can focus on more emergent concerns.

The cuts are being felt in Michigan, which has reported more than 7,000 cases of cyclosporiasis, the most of any state. The cyclospora parasite can cause frequent diarrhea that can last for days or even weeks, as well as abdominal pain, nausea, and fatigue.

The health department in Washtenaw County, Michigan, already pulled some staff off other work, such as immunizations and sexual health, to handle a recent measles outbreak that sickened seven people, including five kids. Now those same nurses are spending hours on the phone with hundreds of people with cyclosporiasis, trying to trace the source of their illness through weeks-old takeout receipts, bank statements, and recollections.

“We are starting to see the consequences of an underfunded public health system in 2026,” said Natasha Bagdasarian, Michigan’s chief medical executive. “Currently it’s cyclospora. Eventually, we are going to lose the ability to detect something else.”

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