



## **The Nation's Health Podcast transcript: 5 major threats to vaccines in the age of RFK Jr.**

### **April 2025 episode**

As a vaccine skeptic now leads the country's top health agency, U.S. vaccination rates are facing threats never seen before. So in today's episode, we're diving into five major threats to vaccines in the age of RFK Jr.

**MEADOR:** This is The Nation's Health Podcast, and I'm your host, Sophia Meador.

*In 1999, vaccination was hailed as one of the greatest public health achievements of the 20th century. But fast forward 25 years, and vaccination rates against common childhood diseases are actually dropping. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that over 280,000 kindergartners started school last fall without protection against diseases like measles, mumps and rubella.*

*A leading voice in the vaccine discussion is that of Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the new U.S. secretary of Health and Human Services. Kennedy is not a physician, and he does not have a background in public health — unless chairing an anti-science nonprofit with a history of spreading vaccine conspiracy theories counts.*

*During his short time in office, HHS has canceled important advisory meetings on vaccinations, they've downplayed the ongoing measles outbreak, and appointed an anti-vaccine activist to look into already-disproven theories on autism.*

*So to shed light on what's at stake, we're going to talk to an actual expert about five threats to vaccines in the age of RFK Jr.*

**OFFIT:** My name is Paul Offit. I am the director of the Vaccine Education Center at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and a professor of pediatrics at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine.

**MEADOR:** Thanks for joining us, Dr. Offit.

**So vaccine skepticism is far from new. Even in the late 18th century, conspiracies circulated that smallpox would morph vaccinated people into cows. What makes this moment different?**

**OFFIT:** I think we've entered a different age. You're right. Vaccine skepticism isn't new, but I think now we're at a time when I fear that science is losing its place as a source of truth. People just simply declare their own truths — they've become the mainstream. I think the conspiracy theorist, the anti-vaccine activist, has not only become mainstream, they've become policymakers.

**MEADOR:** And speaking of policymakers, one threat we should highlight is research.

**Currently, the Trump administration is massively cutting the federal workforce. And the National Institutes of Health, the primary agency for public health research, has lost thousands of workers. Also terminated were dozens of grants for scientific research projects related to vaccine use and hesitancy.**

**OFFIT:** I think that there clearly is an assault on vaccine research. It will be interesting to see how the pharmaceutical companies are reacting to this. Do they see this as a long-term problem? Did they see this as a serious threat to vaccines? Remembering that vaccines are not big money makers — they're something you give once or a few times in your lifetime.

We had 27 companies that made vaccine in the mid 1950s; by the early 1980s, we had 18 companies, and by the end of the 1980s we had four companies. So the companies are perfectly willing to give this up. It is a fragile market, and I do worry.

**MEADOR:** And another threat that's already visible in the age of RFK Jr. is public health preparedness and response.

**Measles is considered eliminated in the U.S., but during the time of this recording, 483 cases have been reported in the U.S. this year, including the death of a child in West Texas. How is vaccine skepticism affecting the public health workforce's ability to effectively prepare and respond to outbreaks?**

**OFFIT:** So we had 58 cases of measles reported in the United States in 2023. Last year, in 2024, we had 285 cases. People on the ground in West Texas have told me that they don't think that there's just a few hundred cases. They think there's about 2,000 cases.

What do I think is the future? I think this is the future. I think this is just going to get worse and worse until enough children suffer, or, frankly, die before we get our attention here. You had the first child death of measles in this country, a perfectly healthy 6-year-old girl, since 2003 — that's more than 20 years ago that we had a child die from measles. And I think this is the beginning of this particular horror film.

**MEADOR:** And both nationally and internationally, vaccine support is on the decline. During RFK Jr.'s confirmation hearing, he said he's not anti vaccine. But he's since taken actions that seem otherwise. What could that fallout mean?

**OFFIT:** I think he will continue to erode confidence in vaccines, do what he can, either through the Vaccine for Children's Program or the Vaccine Injury Compensation Program, to make vaccines less affordable and less available.

**MEADOR:** And internationally, vaccines are also becoming less available. The Trump administration is reportedly going to end financial support for the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization, which has vaccinated more than 1 billion children over the last quarter century.

**OFFIT:** You know, it's not an altruistic act. Measles, for example, rages in the world. It comes into this country every year from people either coming from international sites or people from this country who traveled internationally and come back. So this is only going to get worse.

This is just an erosion in the vaccine infrastructure. And we're just seeing, I think, the beginning of it.

**MEADOR:** It looks like vaccine requirements are also under threat.

In February, President Trump signed an executive order that prohibits federal funding for schools with COVID-19 vaccine mandates. A handful of states have introduced bills loosening or even expunging vaccine requirements from schools.

**Who is going to be impacted by this?**

**OFFIT:** I think it's going to hurt all of us. I think as a general rule, it's an underserved community that suffers the most in this, and that's likely to be true as well, and also that when you take away sort of what was, quote-unquote, "the COVID money," you're also taking away the fact that that money was used for a variety of other initiatives.

So I think what you're watching is a gradual dissolution of the public health infrastructure and the immunization infrastructure.

**MEADOR:** One of the biggest threats to vaccines is misinformation and conspiracy theories. CDC was directed to investigate vaccines and autism, even as science has already proven there is no connection.

**How do you think this might undermine public trust in vaccines?**

**OFFIT:** There have been 24 studies, retrospective studies, done in seven countries on three continents, looking at children who did or didn't get the MMR vaccine, and they've all shown the same thing: the vaccine doesn't cause autism.

But Robert F. Kennedy Jr. doesn't believe it. Because he has this fixed belief, and all that's going to do is further scare people away from vaccines. I don't think this is going to go well.

**MEADOR: Finally, do you have any advice for public health workers who are trying to navigate this new environment?**

**OFFIT:** The good news is we have science on our side.

It reminds me the Galileo story, when Galileo was censured by the Roman Catholic Church in the early 1600s for daring to say that Copernicus was right — that the Earth revolved around the sun. I think that now, no matter how many times RFK Jr. or his acolytes, or fringe scientists, or irresponsible media people or sycophants say that vaccines cause autism, or all the other false claims that are made, know that the science is on your side. That's a powerful thing to have on your side, so that's standing right behind you.

**MEADOR: Thanks for joining us today, Dr. Offit.**

**And for more on challenges to vaccines, check out the May issue of The Nation's Health, which goes online April 30.**