



## The Nation's Health Podcast transcript: Voices to trust amid vaccine chaos

### *July 2025 episode*

**SOPHIA MEADOR:** *With vaccine science under attack, some health professionals are questioning where they can turn for credible science-based vaccine guidance. In today's episode, we're answering just that.*

*From the American Public Health Association. I'm Sophia Meador, and this is The Nation's Health Podcast. Joining me as co-host for this episode is The Nation's Health's Arushi Dogra.*

**DOGRA:** Thanks, Sophia. I'm glad to be here.

**MEADOR:** *Today we're diving into vaccines — and how public attitudes towards immunizations are shifting.*

**DOGRA:** That's a really important topic. What kind of shifts are we seeing?

**MEADOR:** *Well, across the country, we are seeing a decline in vaccination rates — especially for children. If we look at numbers from before the pandemic, specifically the 2019-2020 school year and compare them with the 2023-2024 school year, coverage for vaccines that protect kids from diseases like measles, chickenpox and mumps have all dropped, falling from 95 to 93% that's according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, based on reports from state and local immunization programs.*

**DOGRA:** Interesting, but isn't 93% still relatively high?

**MEADOR:** *Yeah, that's true. But public health professionals are hoping to get that number back up to 95% — that's the Healthy People 2030 target for measles, mumps, rubella vaccination and it's also the threshold we need to prevent measles from spreading in communities.*

**DOGRA:** That makes a lot of sense.

**MEADOR:** *Yeah, and unfortunately, recent research suggests this trend may not be improving. A research letter in JAMA Network Open this month found that nearly half of first-time parents were uncertain about following the full recommended vaccine schedule. Meanwhile, about 1 in 3 parents of young children had refused some — or even all — routine childhood vaccines.*

**DOGRA:** Wow, so why is this happening right now?

**MEADOR:** *Well, it's complicated, but one thing many public health professionals point to is that federal leaders are actively sowing doubt about vaccines, especially the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F Kennedy Jr.*

*He has a long history of promoting vaccine misinformation and conspiracy theories. And since February, Kennedy dismissed all 17 members of CDC Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, replacing them with his own picks — several of whom have expressed anti-vaccine views. He also came out against COVID-19 vaccines for children and pregnant people, and under his watch, HHS ended a CDC advertising campaign that promoted the flu vaccination.*

**DOGRA:** Thanks for explaining that, Sophia. Can you tell us a bit about who we'll be hearing from on the podcast today?

**MEADOR:** *Of course. So today, we'll have on a national expert on childhood health and vaccinations, Dr. Molly O'Shea. She's been a pediatrician for over 30 years and is also a spokesperson for the American Academy of Pediatrics.*

*So AAP — just like APHA — is not a federal agency. It's a professional association that works to support the health of children, including providing clinical guidance for pediatric care. It's a trusted source that public health and medical communities can rely on.*

**DOGRA:** That sounds great. I'm really excited to hear it.

**MEADOR:** Thanks. Arushi, before our next interview, we have a quick word from our sponsor.

**SPONSOR:** *Looking to recharge, reconnect and get inspired? Join thousands of your peers this November at APHA Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C. You'll hear fresh perspectives on public health challenges come for the insights and connections leave with renewed energy. Register today at [APHA.org](https://www.apha.org)*

**O'SHEA:** I am Molly O'Shea. I'm a pediatrician based in Michigan and I'm also an American Academy of Pediatrics official spokesperson.

**MEADOR:** **Thanks so much for joining us, Dr. O'Shea. How have you seen attitudes towards vaccine shift?**

**O'SHEA:** Since the Trump administration took office, I've seen big shifts in vaccine questions from families, and I've seen it really on both sides.

I've seen some families concerned that their children may not have access to vaccines in the same way and want to know if they can even accelerate vaccine acquisition — get their vaccines early, get more of them.

And I've also seen families who now have new questions or have really gained more uncertainty about the safety or whether or not vaccines work as well as we thought they did.

**And what's that risk if our vaccine infrastructure weakens?**

**O'SHEA:** The more people who choose not to get vaccines, the more we as a whole community are at risk of having illness. And some of those illnesses are less easy to catch from one another and some are very easy to catch, one person to the next.

So depending on the illness, we may see big changes in our illness rates. And for other illnesses, we may see pockets of illness, depending on the community in which you live.

### **And which diseases pose the greatest threat without vaccine coverage?**

**O'SHEA:** Measles is the most contagious and if you have 100 people in a room and they get exposed to measles and they are not vaccinated, over 95 of them are likely to get infected with it.

And that's very different than influenza, where if you were had those same 100 people in a room, only 10 of them might get infected. And that's even different than, let's say, an illness like polio...you'd have to get exposed to poop. Not very fun! But if you're not vaccinated, you still won't see that same rate.

So measles is the most contagious, but it's not necessarily the one that has the most severe outcomes. The ones with the most severe outcomes would be meningitis illnesses, polio, things like that.

The people who are traditionally most vulnerable to vaccine-preventable illnesses are little kids, babies — especially under a year of age. Pregnant people, because their body's immune systems have to adjust to carrying a living person inside them. It's kind of like having an alien, right? And your immune system has to say don't look at that stranger behind the curtain. And so the immune system quiets down. And so you're more susceptible to illness.

And older people whose immune systems are just kind of tired. You know, they're old.

And then people who are undergoing treatment for cancers, whose immune systems are kind of already sort of wiped out and people who have immune deficiencies, they're the ones that have greatest risk.

But we also have to look at people who just might have an area of their body that's fragile. That also puts them at risk.

### **And where can people turn for reliable vaccine guidance, beyond the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention?**

**O'SHEA:** If you have children, the American Academy of Pediatrics has for 100 years put out a reliable vaccine schedule and given information about vaccination and if you're an adult, each of the adult societies — the Infectious Disease Society, the American Academy of Family Medicine and the adult internal medicine groups — all have great vaccine information available for grown-ups too.

### **And how can we rebuild trust and counter vaccine doubt?**

**O'SHEA:** That's a tricky one and a hard one, because to rebuild trust takes our willingness to be open-hearted with one another. And in order to rebuild trust, we have to be willing to actually really listen to one another — to not be defensive when someone else is sharing information, to be willing and able to take new information that might not quite sit right with what we've thought was the case, and research and integrate new information for ourselves.

And then also to hold in our hearts people who may not always completely see things our way. But to consider the needs of a whole society, not just the needs of an individual. Transparency is key as well, so communication, listening, being open-minded and thinking about people beyond ourselves.

**What roles do public health workers play?**

**O'SHEA:** Health workers are really important because sometimes it's easier for us to think about what affects me or my kids or the people I'm familiar with and public health workers really think about the whole society, everybody in our community and think about the policies and the way to manage health for the greater good of the entire population.

Having vaccines accessible, available and encourage for kids of all ages, of all income levels, in all communities, rural and urban, is a way to keep everybody healthy, and making that access easy is an important one and public health workers help facilitate that access.

**MEADOR:** *Thanks to Dr. O'Shea for her time and expertise.*

**For more on AAP childhood vaccination recommendations, visit [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org).**