



Cyclospora in the USA: why is it so hard to stop?

The epidemiological challenges of the parasite have been compounded by recent cutbacks at US health agencies. Susan Jaffe reports from Washington DC.

For the CDC's health alert for medical providers see <https://www.cdc.gov/han/php/notices/han00531.html>

For more about the CDC resignations see [World Report](#) *Lancet* 2025; **406**: 1074–75

Make America Healthy Again is more than a slogan for Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F Kennedy Jr, who has pledged to make Americans' food supply safe and improve their nutrition. However, the record-breaking outbreaks of cyclosporiasis across the USA are proving how difficult it is to keep those promises, especially after the agencies responsible for protecting health have been depleted by staff reductions and funding cuts.

On July 21, Kennedy declared the cyclosporiasis outbreak was "under control", 4 days after a voluntary recall of lettuce from Taylor Farms in Mexico, which had been shipped to 27 states and was suspected of causing the intestinal disease. At that time, there were about 1645 laboratory-confirmed cases linked to one outbreak in five states. A week later, as this article went to press, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said the case count rose to 4173 laboratory-confirmed cases in 41 states, plus another 7400 suspected cases still under investigation. There were only 249 cyclosporiasis cases reported nationally by this time in 2025, the CDC told clinicians, public health

practitioners, and laboratorians in a health alert notice on July 14.

However, Michigan health officials have reported 8176 cases in their state, nearly double the CDC's nationwide count. "We don't have a centralised system in the US", said Katelyn Jetelina, an adjunct professor

"...CDC is failing because of its leadership, not because of its scientists"

at the Yale School of Public Health and author of *Your Local Epidemiologist*, a popular Substack column. "Data is collected on a local level, then it goes to the state, and then the state reports it to CDC." The state count is typically way ahead of the CDC count, she said. "That's part of all the confusion about how big this outbreak is and how all the numbers aren't matching up for everyone."

This year's cases are expected to increase because "we assume a 6-week reporting lag between illness onset and case reporting to CDC", the agency said on its website. Symptoms include bouts of watery diarrhoea that can take up to 2 weeks to develop and can persist for as long as a month. Critics have said a 6-week delay is too long.

"If they're trying to remove the source [of contamination] from the market, a 6-week lag means your radar is detecting the submarine when it's already gotten to port", said Demetre Daskalakis, former Director of the CDC's National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases. He and other CDC leaders resigned in August, 2025, when Kennedy fired then-CDC Director Susan Monarez after 29 days in the job.

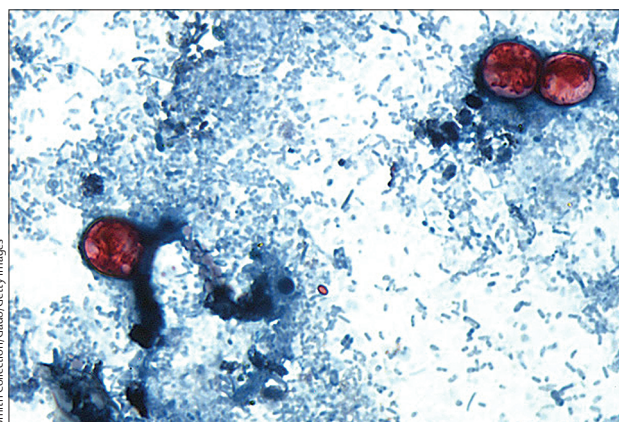
As *The Lancet* went to press, Kennedy had not been quoted in the

media about the outbreaks since his initial comment. Representatives of the Department of Health and Human Services had not responded to *The Lancet's* inquiries. So far, the CDC and US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) have rarely fielded questions in public press conferences. Instead, both agencies appear to prefer updating information on their websites without flagging the changes for the media or the public.

"It is completely outrageous that there is not a daily press update from CDC in the middle of an outbreak so large", said Daskalakis. "The one thing public health is supposed to do is let people know what's going on, and CDC is failing because of its leadership, not because of its scientists. They are chomping at the bit to be able to tell people what's going on."

Detecting cyclospora can be an arduous process. "This parasite is just really hard to find", said Jetelina. It can burrow into the crevices of leafy vegetables as well as parsley, basil, and raspberries, and thrives in warm weather. Although the FDA traced the parasite back to Taylor Farms in Mexico, the agency issued a retraction on July 19, claiming one of its tests was a false positive but insisted that this finding will not affect its overall response. "To clarify, this false-positive lab sample DOES NOT change the basis for FDA's ongoing outbreak investigation or the overwhelming epidemiological data supporting the current voluntary recall by Taylor Farms", the statement continued.

Multiple outbreaks have since been discovered, beyond the initial outbreak that has spread to nine states. But Michigan and Virginia health officials told *The Lancet* that their investigation has not pointed to one kind of contaminated food or a common



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source for the contamination, despite the CDC's conclusions.

Confirming the disease requires specialised laboratory testing that, as CDC warned health-care providers, could fail to detect it even in symptomatic patients. Cyclospora is a parasite with a much larger genome than bacteria, and scientists do not use whole-genome sequencing as they do for bacteria, explained Susan Mayne, an adjunct professor at the Yale School of Public Health, and former Director of the FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition. "It's a much more difficult methodology", she said. Working with very low levels of DNA, researchers must amplify parts of the DNA and then examine panels of markers to identify the cyclospora parasite.

"It's basically getting a fingerprint of the cyclospora", said Daniel Jernigan, a 31-year veteran of CDC who resigned as Director of the National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases in August, 2025. "So, for a foodborne outbreak, you do the genomic testing of the parasite in a person's diarrhoea to see if its fingerprint matches the fingerprint of the cyclospora you found in the food."

Once the culprit is suspected or confirmed, doctors or other medical providers report cases to their local health department, said Brandy Darby, Director of the Division of Surveillance and Investigation at the Virginia Department of Health. The department's epidemiologists or communicable disease nurses will interview people diagnosed with the illness about what they ate and where, to create a food history. Then, state health officials report cases to the CDC.

In Ohio, CDC staff are helping overstretched state health investigators to analyse data for outbreak tracing and to interview people who tested positive for cyclospora according to a state health department spokesperson. As

The Lancet went to press, the state had 2576 confirmed cases.

Complicating matters is the fact that some people might not remember what they ate in the days before they got sick, said Darby. If they ate at a restaurant, they might not know whether their meal included "some cilantro or parsley or other ingredient that could be of interest", she said. "These routine challenges exist across many of our reportable [foodborne] diseases."

Once data reveal a common signal—in this instance, many people had said they ate a meal at a Taco Bell restaurant—the FDA "will look for common ingredients across meals consumed and can start a traceback process to see where those food ingredients came from", said Mayne. The FDA identified Taylor Farms as the source and found that the company's lettuce was also sold to several Walmart stores. The recall notice also indicated other restaurants and food service companies that received the lettuce but did not name them. The omission "is highly atypical", she said.

Health officials in Virginia and Michigan are among those experts questioning the CDC's conclusion linking the nine-state outbreak to Taylor Farms' contaminated lettuce. "We really haven't seen any particular food product or restaurant or anything that's standing out as a common exposure", said Darby.

Former FDA and CDC officials as well as other scientific experts say the Trump administration's cyclospora response exposes shortcomings in its capacity to prevent and contain future foodborne disease outbreaks. "We need more research on cyclospora because our understanding and our knowledge of this parasite is simply behind where we are for bacteria", said Mayne. "We need more tools in this toolbox." She co-chaired the FDA's National Advisory Committee for Microbiological

Criteria in Food. Its group of external experts provided technical advice and scientific input on "some very high priority pathogens", including cyclospora, she said. However, when the Trump administration took over, it terminated this and other advisory committees. It also fired communications teams that worked in the FDA Commissioner's office and within Mayne's food safety centre.

At the CDC, resources and laboratories for genomic testing for cyclospora were shared with the malaria programme, said Jernigan, and were funded by the United States Agency for International Development. The Trump administration dismantled it last year. "If you cut the malaria programme funding, you end up compromising the cyclospora work", said Jernigan. "That's one thing the administration has not fully comprehended."

The Trump administration also delayed implementation of an FDA rule that would have required food supply companies to keep detailed records of where their food products originate and their destination. Known as the Food Traceability Rule, it would have taken effect this year, but after the food industry demanded more time to comply, the administration postponed it until 2028.

After a series of layoffs, dismissals, and incentivised retirements in 2025, staffing vacancies permeate both the FDA and CDC, including at the highest levels. Both agencies lack Senate-confirmed leaders. Although the FDA is responsible for ensuring the safety of US food supply, it has not met required annual minimum targets for domestic food facilities inspections since 2018, according to a 2025 report from the US Government Accountability Office. The report recommended that the FDA improve inspector recruitment and retention, but FDA officials responded by calling the inspection targets unrealistic and unachievable.

Susan Jaffe

For the General Accountability's Office report on FDA inspections see <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-25-107571.pdf>