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FDA pauses updates on foodborne outbreak probes as health agencies regroup on communications



Updated on: January 24, 2025 / 11:13 AM EST / CBS News

Multiple federal health agencies have stopped releasing some key health information – including updates on some outbreak investigations – amid a department-wide communications "pause" ordered by the Trump administration, though many other "mission critical" updates are still being released, CBS News has learned.

The Department of Health and Human Services "has issued a pause on mass

communications and public appearances that are not directly related to emergencies or critical to preserving health," Stefanie Spear, the HHS principal deputy chief of staff, told CBS News in an email. "This is a short pause to allow the new team to set up a process for review and prioritization."

The Food and Drug Administration, a federal agency of the HHS, usually releases updates on probes of outbreaks linked to contaminated food every Wednesday, but the agency did not release them this week. As of the FDA's last update on Jan. 15, authorities were investigating multiple outbreaks of E. coli and Listeria.

Publication of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's authoritative scientific publication, the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, has also been delayed, health officials said. Articles have been published virtually every Thursday for decades, detailing agency guidance, updates on disease outbreak investigations and studies of health threats. But no issue was published this past Thursday.

Weekly CDC updates on rates of flu and COVID-19 vaccinations have also been disrupted, the agency's website shows. Local health departments and nonprofits rely on these figures to track uptake of the shots, targeting outreach to communities seeing lagging immunization rates.

A Jan. 21 memo obtained by CBS News from acting Health and Human Services Secretary Dr. Dorthy Fink ordered health agencies to, "consistent with precedent," stop all new policies, communications and speaking engagements without clearing them with officials from the new administration until Feb. 1.

Politico first reported the directive on Tuesday.

Spear said there are "exceptions" for "mission critical" announcements, which will be made "on a case-by-case basis."

HHS Memo Jan21 by CBSNews.com

The CDC on Thursday still released its weekly tally of certain infectious diseases reported to the agency from health departments, which include tracking of germs like whooping cough that have seen a record wave in recent months.

Updated data on trends in emergency room visits from respiratory diseases were also updated Friday. Local officials and healthcare systems use the data to track influenza and COVID-19 every winter during surges.

At least some of the CDC's work with outsiders is still ongoing. A spokesperson

for Alabama's health department said Thursday that the CDC was still involved in an ongoing investigation of unusual side effects linked to an antibiotic injection used in the state.

Public health labs have also so far not been hindered by the pause, a lab official outside the federal government said, despite a handful of webinars and calls that were canceled.

An update to the CDC's travel notice about Tanzania was also published Thursday, after the World Health Organization announced an outbreak of Marburg virus disease had been confirmed in the country.

The FDA is still releasing notices about recalls. A safety communication was also posted by the FDA this week, warning of an allergic reaction linked to a multiple sclerosis medication.

Multiple current and former health officials said a slowdown in communications has happened during every recent transition, as incoming officials sought to get a handle around the firehose of information and guidance coming from across the federal health bureaucracy.

But some also said the length and scope of the communications slowdown was unusual, resulting in confusion among staff as health agencies sought to stop or claw back communications, meetings and events to comply with the directive.

At the National Institutes of Health, meetings set up to review grant applications were abruptly canceled and agency experts at outside events and conferences were either unexpectedly recalled or participated without making any comments, one researcher said.

A meeting organized by the Presidential Advisory Council for Combating Antibiotic Resistant Bacteria scheduled for next week was also canceled, according to an email obtained by CBS News. Health officials from several countries were scheduled to discuss strategies to respond to superbugs at the meeting.

Another monthly meeting scheduled by the CDC for Jan. 27 with testing laboratories was also canceled. The CDC relies on the monthly calls to answer questions about guidance and ongoing outbreaks from labs, like about the recent change in testing procedures in response to this past year's unprecedented bird flu outbreak.

The end of the communications "pause" will coincide with the conclusion of Senate hearings next week for Robert F. Kennedy Jr., President Trump's controversial nominee to lead the Department of Health and Human Services.

It's not clear whether Kennedy, a former Democrat who has been widely criticized for his anti-vaccine statements and activism, will have the support to be confirmed in the closely divided Senate.

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