

# The Washington Post

*Democracy Dies in Darkness*

## U.S. plans to stop recommending most childhood vaccines, defer to doctors

The plan, which is not finalized, suggests children get fewer shots and shifts to a model telling parents to consult doctors to make their own vaccine choices.

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Tracy Beth Hoeg, a top FDA official, presented Denmark as a model for administering fewer childhood vaccines in a meeting of CDC vaccine advisers this month. (Alyssa Pointer/Reuters)

By [Lena H. Sun](#) and [Rachel Rouben](#)

The Trump administration plans to shift the federal government away from directly recommending most vaccines for children and suggest they receive fewer shots to more closely align with Denmark's immunization model, according to two people familiar with the matter.

Federal health officials are weighing vaccine guidance that would encourage parents to talk to a doctor

to make decisions for most shots, according to the people, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe internal deliberations. This approach would mark a fundamental shift in the U.S. health care system, which generally relies on federal health agencies to guide how patients are protected against disease.

It was not immediately clear which shots would no longer be recommended. The plans are still in flux, the people said, but broadly align with [President Donald Trump's directive](#) earlier this month to consider recommending fewer shots, referring to the United States as an “outlier” among developed countries. He said any changes to the country's vaccine schedule should continue to preserve access to currently available shots.

Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has been critical of the childhood vaccine schedule for years and has called for additional scrutiny, even though he told senators during his confirmation hearings that he supports the schedule.

Andrew Nixon, a spokesperson for the Department of Health and Human Services, said of the planned revisions to vaccine recommendations: “Unless you hear it from HHS directly, this is pure speculation.” The potential shift to more closely align with Denmark's schedule was first [reported](#) by CNN.

The current U.S. schedule calls for vaccinations to protect against 18 infectious diseases, including covid-19, according to a Food and Drug Administration presentation in December, compared with calls for vaccinations to protect against [10 infectious diseases](#) in Denmark. Denmark does not recommend vaccinating children for influenza, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and chicken pox, among other common pathogens.

Public health experts say comparisons to Denmark are misleading, noting the countries differ sharply in population, health systems and disease burden. They argue that what works in Denmark's small, universal health care system does not easily translate to the far larger and more diverse U.S. population with uneven access to quality care.

“You don't just superimpose policies from other countries without context onto the United States,” said Demetre Daskalakis, who oversaw the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's center for respiratory diseases and immunization before [he resigned](#) from the agency in August. “This is not gold standard science.”

A Danish health official questioned why the U.S. would follow his country's lead.

“Personally, I do not think this makes sense scientifically,” Anders Hviid, an official in Denmark's Statens Serum Institute, which prevents and controls infectious diseases as part of the country's ministry of health, wrote in an email early Saturday. “Public health is not one size fits all. It's population specific and dynamic. Denmark and the U.S. are two very different countries.”

Unlike Denmark, the U.S. is planning a more limited approach for recommending vaccines to children known as shared clinical decision-making, which has not been reported. This means people should consult a doctor, pharmacist or other medical professional before getting a shot, and insurers would still be required to pay for them. It's not clear how broad the shift would be and when it would happen.

This type of recommendation is usually made when there is real uncertainty about the benefits and risks, said David Higgins, an assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Colorado Anschutz

Medical Campus. By applying it broadly to many vaccines that are now routinely recommended, it creates the false impression that experts are divided on the best way to protect health, he said.

“I have never been more concerned about the future of vaccines and children’s health than I am now,” Higgins said.

In practice, vaccination is often already done in consultation with doctors, who explain the risks and benefits to patients. But critics of the shared clinical decision-making approach say it takes the government out of the business of providing powerful endorsements and can confuse doctors.

A [2016 survey](#) found that most pediatricians and family doctors did not know private insurers are required to cover vaccines recommended under this model.

Under Kennedy, the CDC has [already shifted recommendations](#) for some vaccines to this talk-to-a-doctor approach, including for covid and the hepatitis B vaccine for children. In the case of adults seeking covid vaccines, the shift has had little practical impact at major pharmacy chains such as CVS where the shots are still routinely administered without prescriptions.

Kennedy, the founder of a prominent anti-vaccine group, has previously decried the “[exploding vaccine schedule](#)” and blamed it for the rise of chronic disease, autism and food allergies in the United States. Medical experts [have said](#) more vaccines are available now to combat more diseases, arguing the link has no basis in evidence.

In a [Truth Social post](#) this month, Trump wrote that “many parents and scientists have been questioning the efficacy of this ‘schedule,’ as have I!”

The plan to redo the U.S. schedule “kicked into high gear” immediately after Trump’s directive, one person familiar with the plan said. Two experts who were consulted — Martin Kulldorff, recently named a chief science officer at HHS, and Tracy Beth Hoeg, a top official at the Food and Drug Administration — have expressed concern about the number of vaccinations in the U.S. schedule.

Hoeg gave a presentation two weeks ago comparing the U.S. with Denmark during a meeting of the CDC’s federal vaccine advisory committee. [One of her slides](#), titled “Danish Vaccination Schedule Benefits,” said the country makes more time for overall health at doctors’ appointments and decreases the “medicalization of childhood.”

The [Denmark schedule](#) does not include seasonal respiratory vaccines, such as RSV, the leading cause of infant hospitalizations in the U.S., or influenza for children. During last year’s flu season, the CDC reported 288 pediatric-influenza-associated deaths, the highest number since the 2009-2010 H1N1 swine flu pandemic.

Denmark also does not recommend vaccinating against hepatitis B for all infants, as well as hepatitis A and rotavirus for any infants and children.

Higgins, the Colorado pediatrician, said many clinics and pediatricians will simply say they don’t recommend the Denmark schedule, which will worsen parental confusion. School vaccination requirements are set by state laws, and most require some of the vaccines that aren’t on the Denmark schedule, Higgins said.

Denmark has universal prenatal care and strong social services. Tom Frieden, a former CDC director, [recently wrote](#) that virtually every pregnant woman in Denmark receives consistent medical

attention and testing for serious diseases that can be passed to their babies throughout their pregnancy, including hepatitis B.

About 1 in 4 pregnant patients in the U.S. deliver babies without adequate prenatal care, according to a [report](#) by the March of Dimes.

“We do not believe in the one-size-fits-all approach nor the approach of choose one random alternate national schedule and adopt it,” said James Campbell, vice chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics’ infectious-diseases committee.

Del Bigtree, Kennedy’s former communications director during his presidential run and the leader of an anti-vaccine group, said he’d support shifting to a Denmark model for vaccination, adding that the “medical freedom” movement has always touted that country.

“Our belief is there are just too many vaccines,” Bigtree said. “It’s very exciting, but it still won’t solve my major issue that vaccines aren’t mandated.”

*Lauren Weber contributed to this report.*