

BY WHAT AUTHORITY — If there's one thing that even HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s fierce critics generally agree with him on, it's that Americans have a lousy diet. — Politico, March 19, 2025

We are a pretty fat nation.

We eat too much and lots of it is stuff that isn't good for us. Some ultra processed foods in our kitchens have too many unpronounceable chemicals on the labels. We have a high burden of diet-fueled chronic disease, including diabetes.

But there's a catch. Several catches, actually.

RFK Jr. — or any secretary of Health and Human Services for that matter, Democrat or Republican — can't fix it by himself.

HHS doesn't have oversight over all food and nutrition products and policies. Nor does the Food and Drug Administration, which is under HHS. Much of that is up to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. They may collaborate with Kennedy. Or they may not.

For instance, Kennedy favors making school lunches healthier — but that's under USDA control. In the first Trump administration, USDA [rolled back some healthy changes](#) promoted by former First Lady Michelle Obama.

Fixing nutrition across the board and expanding access to healthy food would require investment and likely regulation. Neither the White House nor Congress nor Elon Musk appear to be in the mood right now for more money or regulation for health and nutrition. Under the House budget resolution calling for \$1.5 trillion in cuts over ten years, lawmakers are [considering cutting federal spending](#) on SNAP, better known as food stamps.

More states have been using Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) to address "social determinants of health," things like food and housing that contribute to poor health among lower-income people. But the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services [quietly announced this month](#) that it's ending those programs, although it did say it would examine state options case by case. CMS will be run by Dr. Mehmet Oz, assuming he's confirmed. Kennedy would be his boss.

Then there's the whole question of science. Can RFK Jr. et al really Make America Healthy Again without more research into nutrition, obesity, and food's role in chronic disease? The budgets of every federal science-funding agency, many of which are part of HHS, are being eviscerated and the scientists fired.

None of this means that Kennedy can't make progress on nutrition. Even experts who are aghast at his stances on vaccines or measles do see tantalizing opportunities for healthier eating in MAHA.

"We have a food industry that makes us sick and a sick care industry that profits from it. We need to change," Jerold Mande, who served in the USDA in the Obama administration and now is CEO of an organization called Nourish Science, told Nightly.

One key opening comes in December 2025, when the USDA and HHS must update "My Plate" nutritional guidelines (the successor to the Food Pyramid). Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins [said in a recent statement that she and Kennedy](#) working together "will make certain the 2025-2030 Guidelines are based on sound science, not political science. Gone are the days where leftist ideologies guide public policy."

Mande says Rollins and her team have signaled they may be open to using dietary guidelines in creative new ways. Just as Medicare ends up shaping much of the overall U.S. health system, pilot projects flowing from nutritional guidelines could shape the food retail environment and shopper behavior, nudging people away from soda and chips and toward those enticingly displayed baby carrots. "It's a very, very powerful lever, just like Medicare is," Mande said. "It's a question of whether we'll ever use it."

Kennedy also wants the FDA to take a close look at food additives. Given how little scrutiny they've had, and how much control the food industry itself has, that may be overdue. Yet there's a risk of overreach. Peter Lurie, president and executive director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest and former associate FDA commissioner for public health strategy, said some additives have been well-studied and are beneficial. Safe preservatives prevent food from spoiling; other additives have antimicrobial properties.

Ignoring that is "not really consistent with science," Lurie said. "The worst scenario is that you have some kind of broad brush approach to the removal of additives, and then

there's an outbreak of foodborne illness that might have been prevented by an additive that you just took out.”

And of course, there's Kennedy's insistence that diet — not FDA-approved medications including breakthrough diabetes and obesity drugs — is the key to a healthy America. Many scientists point out that diet alone, though important for prevention, won't cure diabetes, heart disease or cancers. Nor is food the sole cause of chronic diseases; environmental exposures, genetics and other factors play a role.

And no matter how well or poorly someone with a chronic disease eats, “they are entitled to treatment,” said Lurie. “There's a temptation when you talk about prevention to ignore treatments, and that is especially inappropriate at this moment where we finally have effective treatments.”

At HHS, Kennedy will have power over more than just how treatments are talked about or researched or regulated. He will also have a voice in which medicines government health programs pay for — and for whom.