

Whopper of the Week: When RFK Jr.'s Uncle Was President, Americans Were Not Healthier

IN SUMMARY:

Secretary Kennedy frequently says that Americans were healthier and had fewer chronic diseases in the 1960s. “When my uncle was president,” he told [Fox News](#) in May 2025, “Three percent of Americans had chronic diseases, today it is 60 percent.” Kennedy [varies](#) the exact [statistics](#), but he wildly exaggerates the actual difference.

WHY IS THIS A WHOPPER?

Data about chronic disease in the U.S., dates back to the first National Health Interview Survey ([NHIS](#)) of 1957. The NHIS asks about chronic conditions related to cardiovascular, metabolic, musculoskeletal, neurologic, gastrointestinal, kidney disease, cancer, and sensory impairments. A [1960](#) National Health Survey, during the Kennedy Presidency, reported that 41 percent of the country had one or more chronic conditions. A [2018](#) NHIS survey found that 51.8 percent of respondents had at least one chronic condition and 27.2 percent reported multiple chronic conditions.

Chronic disease prevalence in the U.S. has certainly increased over Secretary Kennedy’s lifespan but it’s hard to [compare](#) these two time periods directly. First, the American population was [younger](#) in 1960, with a median age of 29.5 years versus 39.5 years in 2024. The older the population, the more health problems are to be expected. Second, the [survey](#) slightly changed its questions and what constitutes chronic disease over the decades. Third, medicine has advanced. Earlier screening and more diagnostic tools, alert patients to illness sooner. Better medical care also means that more people live longer with chronic diseases like hypertension or cancer.

In some ways, Americans are healthier than their grand and great-grand parents. Life expectancy has jumped from 69.7 years in [1960](#) to 79 years in [2024](#). Children are [five times](#) less likely to die in infancy or early childhood. New mothers are half as likely to die now than in 1960. Forty percent of adults smoked [tobacco](#) in the 1960s, only 11 percent do now. Our [water](#) and [air](#) are less polluted. Our [medicines](#) are much more likely to be safe and actually effective. The 1960s were a period of progress but health was not “better” then.

Unfortunately, since the [1980s](#), the U.S. has fallen far behind other rich nations. We rank 49th globally in the average number of years a person can expect to live in good health, according to [IHME](#), despite our extraordinarily high health care [costs](#). The [Commonwealth Fund](#) calls the

U.S. an outlier whose healthcare system performance is dramatically lower than peer countries and fails meet the population's most basic health care needs.

WHY IT MATTERS:

A Secretary of Health should lead the country to a better future, not wax nostalgic about a mythical past. Kennedy's focus on chronic diseases is good, but he's wrong about the [policies](#) that would help. Removing access to vaccines will only increase infectious disease mortality and the chronic disease burden associated with infections. Eating "real food" is a laudable goal, but not something that is accessible or affordable to many Americans without nutrition assistance. The solution to the obesity epidemic in the U.S. is unlikely to rest on individual food choices, and will require a [whole-system](#) approach to "disrupt the structural drivers of obesity."

Kennedy refuses to acknowledge the role that poverty, racism and inequality play in affecting the health of Americans. It's easier to tell individuals to avoid dietary and environmental "toxins" than to reform a fragmented and expensive health care system and threadbare social safety net.

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