NIH Funding Cuts Disrupt Clinical Trials, Affecting 74,000 Participants

Funding cuts to the National Institutes of Health are impeding research on cancer, heart disease, HIV, mental health, COVID-19 and more.

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The Trump administration has terminated billions of dollars in grants to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), impacting over 74,000 people enrolled in medical studies and clinical trials, including cancer research, according to a report published in JAMA Internal Medicine.

The report shows that between the end of February and mid-August, 383 studies—testing treatments for cancer, heart disease, brain disease and more—have been affected by NIH cuts.

What's more, the cuts disproportionately impacted research into infectious diseases, including the flu, pneumonia and COVID-19.

During the study period, about 11,008 NIH-funded studies were disrupted at varying levels.

Some participants may have signed up for trials that never started or were delayed in hopes of securing alternate funding. Others may never see the results of their trial published. Trials that were active and not recruiting, where participants may have been receiving interventions, had a total of 74,311 enrolled patients, according to CBS News.

"The types of trials that are affected are among the most rigorous way that we generate scientific evidence: randomized clinical trials," study author and Harvard Medical School professor Anupam Jena, PhD, told CBS. "Clinical trials are important, gold-standard in terms of evidence generation, time-intensive and costly. Those are the last types of studies we would want to stop mid-stream."

The report found that the Northeast had the highest rate of interrupted trials. Indeed, more than 115 trials studying cancer and 97 trials examining infectious diseases were interrupted.

Researchers also acknowledge that the termination of clinical trials may cause people to lose trust in medical institutions and research projects.

“Clinical trials aren’t light switches,” said Céline Gounder, MD, an editor-at-large for public health at KFF Health News and CBS News medical contributor. “You can’t just flip them off without consequences. Cutting off funding mid-trial wastes research dollars and puts patients at risk. This is a breach of trust with every person who volunteers for research.”

The NIH—the largest funder of biomedical research—comprises more than two dozen institutes, including the National Cancer Institute, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (which leads HIV and COVID-19 research), the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (which includes liver diseases) and the National Institute on Aging.

Federally funded cancer trials provide needed support for essential areas of cancer care that are not well funded by pharmaceutical companies, including early-phase research, multimodality treatments and trials for rare malignancies and pediatric cancers.

“When you’re talking about medical research, when you’re talking about people’s lives, when you’re talking about clinical trials for Alzheimer’s disease or cancer that may take three or four years, you can’t just go in and decide, ‘I’m going to shut those down and maybe I’ll try something else.’ Those are people’s lives at risk,” said former NIH head Francis Collins, MD, PhD.

To read more, click #Federal Funding, #National Institutes of Health or #Cancer Research. There, you’ll see headlines such as “Changes at NIH Give Political Appointees Greater Power to Fund or Block Research,” “Billboards Send Clear Message About Cancer Research Funding” and “Pan-Mass Challenge Raises Record $78 Million for Dana-Farber Cancer Institute.”

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