

Science and Health Questions for Tonight's Democratic Debate



By Alex Berezow, PhD — September 12, 2019



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The other day, CNN hosted a 7-hour long climate change town hall for the Democratic presidential candidates. This, of course, isn't the only scientific topic of relevance to Americans. If we were running the debate, we would ask questions about the following science and health topics:

Vaccines. Measles and other vaccine-preventable infectious diseases are on the rise, largely due to anti-vaxxer propaganda.

- California has passed new laws that will require the state to investigate doctors who hand out more than five vaccine exemptions per year and schools whose immunization rates are below 95%. Should this law be adopted nationwide?
- Should social media accounts that distribute anti-vaxxer propaganda be shut down? If so, by whom?
- Should vaccines be mandatory?

Opioids. The [most recent data](#) [2], from 2017, show that more than 70,000 Americans died from drug overdoses, with nearly 48,000 involving some sort of opioid.

- What is the main driver of this problem? (This is a question meant to test the candidates' knowledge. The correct answer is a combination of recreational drug use and fentanyl, not prescriptions.)
- What is your strategy to decrease the number of people dying from opioids?
- What is your plan to prevent illicit fentanyl from coming into the United States?

Energy policy. Energy policy is of vital importance because it strongly influences both the

economy and the environment.

- Should the United States lead the world in the development of Generation IV, meltdown-proof nuclear technology?
- Should we re-open the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste disposal facility? If not, where should we store our nuclear waste?
- If you're opposed to nuclear power, please explain your plan for simultaneously lowering carbon emissions while realistically meeting our substantial energy needs.

Alternative medicine. Americans are becoming increasingly distrustful of doctors, scientists, pharmaceutical companies, and expertise in general. As a result, alternative medicine continues to grow in popularity.

- Should Medicare, Medicaid, and insurance companies cover the costs of alternative medicine?
- Should the U.S. government continue to fund the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, which investigates pseudoscience like [magnet therapy for pain](#) [3]?
- Should alternative medicine and other "natural products" be regulated in the same manner as other drugs?

Vaping. Americans are rightly concerned about the health effects of vaping.

- Is there a legitimate public health use for vaping devices as a way to help smokers quit?
- Should vaping devices be banned or restricted? If so, how?
- How do we balance two competing public health problems: Finding ways to help smokers quit and preventing teenagers from getting hooked to vaping?

Biotechnology. Biotechnology is playing an increasingly important role in our lives. Some of the technologies raise serious ethical issues.

- Should the federal government provide funding for stem cells derived from embryos that were created solely for research purposes? If not, how can we increase the supply of stem cells for researchers?
- Should the creation of three-parent embryos be allowed?
- Should the FDA expedite the safety review process for GMOs?
- Is there an appropriate role for GMOs in feeding America and the world?
- Should gene editing be regulated in the same way as genetic modification?
- Was the EPA correct in its decision to forbid California from requiring a cancer warning label on glyphosate? More broadly, should states be allowed to have different regulatory standards than the federal government? Who decides if there is a conflict?

What science and health questions would *you* ask if you ran the debate? Put them in the comments section below!

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Links

[1]

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_presidential_debates#/media/File:Kennedy_Nixon_Debat_\(1960\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_presidential_debates#/media/File:Kennedy_Nixon_Debat_(1960).jpg)

[2] <https://www.drugabuse.gov/related-topics/trends-statistics/overdose-death-rates>

[3] <https://nccih.nih.gov/Health/magnets-for-pain>