

European Union action on cancer

Cancer is a major public health concern in terms of disease burden and economic cost. Prevention and early detection are key. The European Union (EU) contributes to tackling cancer with awareness-raising, guidance, and investment in research, as well as information and coordination.

What is cancer?

Cancer refers to a group of diseases characterised by uncontrolled growth of abnormal cells that can invade adjoining parts of the body and spread to other organs (forming metastases). Any part of the body can be affected – there are more than [100](#) types of cancer. In 2013, cancer was the second most common cause of death in the EU. More than [1.3 million people](#) died from cancer that year across the 28 Member States; the main causes being lung, colorectal and prostate cancer among men, and breast, lung, and colorectal cancer among women. From an economic point of view, cancer is a major burden, costing EU Member States a total of [€126 billion](#) in 2009, mainly in terms of healthcare expenditure (€51 billion) and lost productivity due to early death and working days lost to ill-health (€42.6 billion and €9.43 billion respectively).

Risk factors, prevention, early detection

The main risk factors for cancer are smoking and drinking, an unbalanced diet (especially one low in fruit and vegetables), excess weight, and lack of physical activity, as well as environmental and work-related exposure to cancer-causing substances ([carcinogens](#)). More than [30 %](#) of cancer deaths are preventable, mainly through avoiding risk factors and adopting a healthy lifestyle. Today, with early detection (notably screening programmes) and adequate treatment, many cancers are curable.

EU policy and actions

While responsibility for the organisation and delivery of health services lies with the Member States, the EU can complement and add value to these efforts by encouraging the sharing of information and know-how, and by fostering cooperation. Other relevant EU action includes addressing risk factors through legislation, for example on [pesticides](#), [tobacco products](#), and the exposure to carcinogens or mutagens at work (the directive is currently being [amended](#)).

Council

The 2003 [Council recommendation](#) on cancer screening called on EU Member States to implement national screening programmes for breast, cervical and colorectal cancer. Among the topics covered were registration and management of cancer screening data, monitoring of the screening process, and training of personnel.

European Commission

The Commission takes action in the following areas: support for Member States, prevention, screening, quality assurance, research, cancer information, and coordination.

European Partnership for Action Against Cancer

In 2009, the Commission adopted the [Communication on Action Against Cancer: European Partnership](#) and established the [European Partnership for Action Against Cancer](#) (EPAAC) joint action (2009-2013). At the end of the Partnership, the objective was for all Member States to have national cancer plans, i.e. public health programmes to reduce the number of cancer cases and deaths and to improve quality of life of cancer patients. According to the [report](#) on the implementation of the EPAAC/second report on cancer screening of September 2014, EU action has strengthened cooperation and created added value.



Joint action

Building on the EPAAC, the Comprehensive Cancer Control ([Cancon](#)) joint action 2014-2017 aims to help reduce the cancer burden in the EU. It will deliver a [European guide on quality improvement in cancer control](#), which is to be presented at the joint action's final conference in Malta on 14-15 February 2017.

European Code Against Cancer

Developed in cooperation with the World Health Organization's International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), the [European Code Against Cancer](#) is a set of 12 recommendations as to how people can reduce their cancer risk, from 'do not smoke' and 'have a healthy diet', to nudges for cancer screening. The Code was first published in 1987 and has been updated regularly since. Its fourth edition was launched in 2014.

European guidelines

In line with the Council recommendation on cancer screening, the Commission has produced a set of European guidelines for the screening of [breast cancer](#) (2006), [cervical cancer](#) (2008) and [colorectal cancer](#) (2010), to support Member States in implementing screening programmes. In 2013, it published [supplements](#) to the fourth edition of the breast cancer guidelines jointly with IARC, with updates on digital mammography and on pathology quality assurance. The first four [screening recommendations](#) under the recent European Commission initiative on breast cancer ([ECIBC](#)) were launched in November 2016 – in total, some 90 are to be developed over the next few years.

Research programmes

The EU funded [cancer research](#) throughout the Seventh Framework Programme for Research (2007-2013) with a total of €1.5 billion, and further financial support is provided under [Horizon 2020](#) (2014-2020). According to the [Commission](#), as of early 2016, 272 cancer projects were funded with €415 million. Some examples include: research into [cancer progression](#) to improve treatment; the development of [novel therapies](#) for advanced-stage bowel cancer; and the design of a [companion robot](#) to help hospitalised children suffering from cancer.

Cancer information system for Europe

Together with the European Network of Cancer Registries and other stakeholders such as IARC, the Commission's Joint Research Centre is leading the development of a European cancer information system. Comparable EU-wide cancer data and indicators are fundamental for prevention programmes, care processes, epidemiology and future research. Building on existing cancer registries, the system is to become a tool for steering cancer policies.

Expert group on cancer control and steering group on promotion and prevention

In 2014, the Commission established an [expert group on cancer control](#) to help draw up documents and guidelines on cancer data including epidemiology, screening, quality assurance and prevention. The group gathers representatives from EU, EEA and EFTA countries, patients' and professional associations, plus one member from IARC. The [steering group on promotion and prevention](#), composed of representatives from all EU and EEA countries, was set up in 2016 to support the Member States in achieving the WHO 2025 [voluntary global targets](#) for non-communicable diseases and the United Nations [Sustainable Development Goals](#). The steering group will coordinate EU-level interventions on chronic diseases, including cancer.

European Parliament

In its April 2008 [resolution](#) on combating cancer in an enlarged EU, Parliament notably called for action (including adequate financial support) in the form of prevention, early detection, diagnosis and treatment, to tackle the approaching increase in cancer cases in an ageing population. The need to implement nationwide mammography screening was underlined in Parliament's resolutions of [2003](#) and [2006](#), and in a 2015 [written declaration](#). A January 2017 [motion for a resolution](#) on lung cancer encourages the Commission to search for innovative lung cancer treatments.

The MEPs Against Cancer (MAC) group is an informal group of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) working together with the Commission, the Council and stakeholder organisations to improve cancer prevention and control in Europe. In the 2014-2019 parliamentary term, the group's strategic goal is to reduce cancer incidence by promoting prevention, reducing mortality through equitable access to high-quality care, and ensuring good quality of life for cancer patients.

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