

World Cancer Day 2023

Cancer can affect everyone, regardless of age, gender or social status and puts immense pressure on European health systems. Fighting cancer is one of the priorities of the European Health Union. Delivering better long-term care for patients living with cancer also means reducing significant disparities, both between and within Member States. World Cancer Day, marked every year on 4 February, reminds us that cancer is a huge health threat to our society.

World Cancer Day

[World Cancer Day](#) was established on 4 February 2000 at the World Summit Against Cancer for the New Millennium, held in Paris, on the initiative of the Union for International Cancer Control ([UICC](#)). The theme for the ongoing three-year campaign (2022-2024) '[Close the Care Gap](#)' aims to reduce inequalities in access to quality cancer prevention, diagnosis, care and treatment services worldwide.

Background

As defined by the World Health Organization (WHO), [cancer](#) is a generic term for a large group of diseases that can affect any part of the body. One defining feature of cancer is the rapid creation of abnormal cells that grow beyond their usual boundaries, which can then invade adjoining parts of the body and spread to other organs (metastasis). Cancer arises from the transformation of normal cells into tumour cells in a multi-stage process that generally progresses from a pre-cancerous lesion to a malignant tumour.

According to the WHO's International Agency for Research on Cancer ([IARC](#)), based on scientific evidence, at least 40 % of all cancer cases could be prevented with effective primary prevention measures. Tobacco use, alcohol consumption, unhealthy diet, lack of physical activity and air pollution are some of the risk factors for cancer. In addition, Hepatitis B and C viruses and some types of human papillomavirus (HPV) increase the risks for liver and cervical cancer.

The impact of cancer can also be reduced through early detection (even if screening programmes are not effective for all cancer types) and appropriate treatment and care of patients who develop cancer.

The [COVID-19](#) pandemic [severely](#) impacted cancer care, disrupting prevention, diagnosis, treatment, and access to medicines; cancer [research](#) was also impacted, with clinical trials delayed. According to the European Cancer Organisation, an estimated 100 million [screening tests](#) were not performed in Europe during the pandemic and an estimated one million cancer cases could be undiagnosed.

Facts and figures

In 2020, 2.7 million people in the EU were newly [diagnosed](#) with cancer and 1.27 million people died from cancer. This makes cancer the second most common cause of death in the EU, after cardiovascular diseases (and the primary cause of death for [Europeans under 65](#)).

Cancer cases are set to [increase](#) by 24 % by [2035](#), making it the leading cause of death in the EU.

Differences in cancer survival rates across the EU Member States exceed 25 %, illustrating healthcare [inequalities](#).

The European Cancer Information System ([ECIS](#)), managed by the Joint Research Centre (JRC), provides the latest information on indicators that quantify cancer burden across Europe. More men than women are likely to develop cancer across the EU (54 % men and 46 % women, [2020](#)). Among men, the main diagnoses are prostate cancer (23 % of all new cancers diagnosed in 2020), followed by lung cancer (14 %) and colorectal cancer (13 %). Among women, breast cancer is the main diagnosis (29 %).

The economic burden of cancer across the EU is difficult to calculate. In 2021, the Commission estimated the overall [economic impact](#) of cancer to exceed €100 billion annually.



EU action on cancer

EU Member States are responsible for their own healthcare policies and systems. However, according to [Article 168 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union](#), EU action should complement national policies. As far back as 1985, the EU has been fighting cancer alongside Member States, in collaboration with the WHO, the JRC and the IARC. The EU focuses on prevention, research and information (e.g. awareness campaigns) while also fostering cooperation between Member States. The EU also complements Member States' efforts by adopting legislation to address cancer [risk factors](#) (such as exposure to environmental pollution or hazardous substances and radiation, harmful alcohol and tobacco consumption) and ensuring specific policy rules reflect cancer-related concerns.

In February 2021, as part of a push for a strong [European Health Union](#), the European Commission adopted the **Europe's Beating Cancer Plan** to address cancer-related inequalities and help improve prevention, treatment and care. The [plan](#), focusing on actions where the EU can add the most value, is structured around four key action areas (prevention; early detection; diagnosis and treatment; and quality of life) with ten flagship initiatives. Some of these have already been implemented:

1. The [Knowledge Centre on Cancer](#) was set up in June 2021 to help coordinate EU research efforts.
2. The [EU network of national comprehensive cancer centres](#) was launched in December 2021 to help Member States establish at least one integrated national cancer centre (aimed at having the network in place by 2025).
3. Calls for proposals for the '[cancer diagnostic and treatment for all](#)' initiative were launched in 2022.
4. The [European Cancer Inequalities Registry](#) was set up in February 2022 to identify trends, disparities and inequalities between Member States and regions in terms of cancer prevention and care.
5. A Council recommendation on [cancer screening](#) was adopted in December 2022 to strengthen cancer prevention through early detection.
6. [European initiative to understand cancer](#): coordination and support were launched in 2022.
7. Better life for cancer patients' initiative: a report on [access to financial services](#) for persons with a history of cancer was published in May 2022, and work started on a code of conduct.
8. A call for evidence on [vaccination against cancer-causing viruses](#) (HPV and Hepatitis B), in view of a Council recommendation, was launched by the Commission in January 2023.
9. The [European cancer imaging initiative](#) was launched in January 2023 to create a digital infrastructure linking cancer imaging data resources and databases across the EU.
10. Helping children with cancer initiative: the [EU Network of Youth Cancer Survivors](#) was launched in February 2022, a new section on [paediatric cancers](#) has been added to ECIS.

'Europe's Beating Cancer Plan' has a strong focus on **research and innovation** as the starting point towards a new approach to cancer prevention, treatment and care. The EU has continuously invested in cancer [research](#) through successive framework programmes for research and innovation. Under the latest programme, [Horizon Europe](#) (2021-2027), the [EU Mission on Cancer](#) aims to offer a distinct and comprehensive approach by bringing together research, innovation and policy development. The [work programme for 2023-2024](#) notably addresses poorly understood cancers, cancers in children, adolescents and young adults, and cancers in socio-economically vulnerable populations. As part of this mission, the Commission is organising a conference on 7 February 2023, '[Addressing the Needs of Young Cancer Survivors](#)'.

European Parliament

In June 2020, Parliament set up a **Special Committee on Beating Cancer** ([BECA](#)) to review EU action on tackling cancer and its effects on people's lives. BECA [ended](#) its mandate on 23 December 2021. The final report '[Strengthening Europe in the fight against cancer – towards a comprehensive and coordinated strategy](#)' (Rapporteur: Véronique Trillet-Lenoir, Renew Europe, France) including recommendations was adopted by Parliament in February 2022. They focus on cancer prevention, equal access to cancer care across borders, and a European approach addressing medicine shortages.