In the letter of intent accompanying her State of the Union address to the European Parliament on 15 September 2021, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced a number of initiatives to be proposed by the Commission. Under the fifth priority – ‘Promoting our European way of life’ – the Commission states its intention to put forward a proposal to update the 2003 Council recommendation on cancer screening.

The Commission had already mentioned its intention to update the recommendation in its Europe's Beating Cancer plan, as an example of action under Flagship 4: EU cancer screening scheme to help Member States ensure 90 % of the eligible population are offered screenings by 2025.

A call for evidence was launched by the Commission in January 2022.

The Commission put forward its proposal on 20 September 2022. The Commission presents a new approach to support Member States increasing the uptake of cancer screening. Focusing on detection of cancers at an early stage, the objective of the proposed recommendation is to increase the number of screenings, covering more target groups and more cancers.

This new approach, based on the latest available scientific developments and evidence, will support Member States ensuring that 90 % of the EU population who qualify for breast, cervical and colorectal cancer screenings are offered such screening by 2025. The proposed recommendation extends the target group for breast cancer screening to include women between 45 and 74 years of age (as compared to the current age bracket of 50 to 69); recommends that Human Papillomavirus (HPV) testing should take place for women aged 30 to 65, every 5 years or more, to detect cervical cancer, taking account of HPV vaccination status; calls for triage testing for colorectal cancer in people aged 50-74 through faecal immunochemical testing to determine potential follow-up via endoscopy/colonoscopy.

The proposal also extends population-based organised cancer screening to include lung cancer testing for current heavy and ex-smokers aged 50-75, prostate cancer testing in men up to 70 on the basis of prostate specific antigen testing, and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scanning as follow-up, screening for Helicobacter pylori and surveillance of precancerous stomach lesions in places with high gastric cancer incidence and death rates.

The Commission underlines the importance of equal access to screening and the necessity to take into account the needs of particular
socioeconomic groups, persons with disabilities and people living in rural or remote areas. It also introduces a regular systematic monitoring of screening programmes, including disparities, via the European Cancer Information System and the Cancer Inequalities Registry.

As underlined in the Commission's proposal, in 2020, an estimated 2.7 million people living in the EU were diagnosed with cancer.

On 9 December 2022, the Council of the EU adopted a new recommendation on cancer screening to bring down the mortality of cancer and cut the incidence of invasive cancers. Whereas the previous cancer screening recommendation from 2003 was limited to breast, cervical and colorectal cancer, EU Member States agreed to broaden the focus. As far as lung cancer is concerned, Member States should explore the feasibility and effectiveness of screening with use of low-dose computed tomography and give special attention to the identification and targeting of high risk profiles. Prostate cancer: the feasibility and effectiveness of the implementation of organised programmes should be evaluated. Member States with high gastric cancer incidence and death rates should consider cancer screening strategies. On cervical cancer, Member States should consider adapting ages and intervals to individual risk based on the human papilloma virus (HPV) vaccination history of the individuals. The EU recommends testing for HPV as the preferred tool for cervical cancer screening for women aged 30 to 65, with an interval of five years or more. Breast cancer: the Council suggests a lower age limit of 45 years and an upper age limit of 74 years (in addition to the recommended screening for women aged 50 to 69 with mammography).

References:

- Council recommendation of 2 December 2003 on cancer screening
- European Commission, A cancer plan for Europe, website
- European Commission, Cancer screening, website
- European Commission, Commission work programme 2022, COM(2021) 645 final
- Council, 'Council updates its recommendation to screen for cancer', press release, 9 December 2022

Further reading:

- European Parliament, EPRS, World Cancer Day 2023, At a glance, January 2023
Visit the European Parliament homepage on EU health policy.
As of 20 August 2023.