Improving public health: EU measures explained
The EU helps to improve public health through funding and legislation on a wide range of topics, such as food, diseases, clean air and more.

Why health policies are needed at EU level
National governments are primarily responsible for organising and delivering healthcare and social security. The EU's role is to complement and support member states in improving the health of Europeans, reducing health inequalities and moving towards a more social Europe.

Labour market developments and the free movement of people and goods in the internal market necessitate the coordination of public health issues. EU public health policy has helped countries pool resources and tackle common challenges such as antimicrobial resistance, preventable chronic diseases and an aging population.

"A high level of human health protection shall be ensured in all Union policies and activities"

Article 168 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
Legal basis for the EU's health policy

The EU issues recommendations and has laws and standards to protect people, covering health products and services (such as pharmaceuticals, medical devices, eHealth), and patients (rules on patients' rights in cross-border healthcare).

Coronavirus

During the Covid-19 crisis, the EU has worked with member states to reinforce national healthcare systems and limit the spread of the virus, by ensuring the provision of personal protective equipment and medical supplies across Europe, mobilising resources and by supporting research and innovation for effective treatments and actions.

Check out the timeline of EU action against Covid-19

Reinforced EU Health Programme

Health policies are funded through the EU Health programme, which encourages cooperation and promotes strategies for good health and healthcare.

The coronavirus outbreak has shown the need for EU countries to better cooperate and coordinate in times of crisis. In a resolution on the economic recovery plan, MEPs insisted on the creation of a new stand-alone European health programme.

In response to Parliament’s call, the Commission has proposed to invest €9.4 billion from the EU's 2021-2027 long-term budget in a new EU health programme named EU4Health. It aims to
fill the gaps revealed by the pandemic and improve the EU’s crisis management capacity, as well as promoting innovation and investment in the healthcare sector.

The new EU4Health programme focuses on three priorities:

- Protection of people from serious cross-border health threats
- Making medicines and medical supplies available and affordable
- Strengthening health systems and healthcare workforce

The current health programme, covering 2014-2020, has a €450 million budget.

Other funds for health issues are provided by the Horizon 2020 research programme, the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), the EU cohesion policy and the European Fund for Strategic Investment.

**EU agencies**

These specialised EU agencies work to ensure better health and healthier and safer workplaces

- European Environmental Agency
- European Food Safety Authority
- European Agency for Safety and Health at Work

**Medicines and medical devices**

The EU regulates the authorisation and classification of medicines through the European medicines regulatory network, a partnership between the European Medicines Agency, national regulators and the European Commission. Once on the market, the safety of authorised products continues to be monitored.

There are specific EU rules covering medicines for children, rare diseases, advanced therapy products and clinical trials. The EU also has rules to fight falsified medicines and to ensure that the trade in medicines is controlled.

New rules on medical devices and in vitro diagnostic medical devices, such as heart valves or laboratory equipment, were adopted by MEPs in 2017 to keep up with scientific progress, improve safety and ensure better transparency.

As rules on the use of medical cannabis vary widely among EU countries, Parliament called for an EU-wide approach and properly funded scientific research in 2019.
Healthcare when abroad

The European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) ensures that people living in the EU can have access to medically necessary, state-provided healthcare during a temporary stay - whether a business trip, holiday, or a study abroad - in all EU countries, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland. Necessary healthcare should be provided under the same conditions and at the same cost (free in some countries) as people insured in that country.

Promoting health and tackling diseases

The EU works to promote health and prevent diseases in areas such as cancer, mental health and rare diseases, and provides information on diseases via the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC).

Fighting cancer has always been an EU priority. The EU invests funds in research projects and training programmes, adopts legislation and complements member states’ efforts by sharing information and best practices.

Tobacco consumption is responsible for nearly 700,000 deaths every year in the EU. The updated EU tobacco directive, aiming to make tobacco products less attractive for young people, became applicable in 2016. The Council recommendation on smoke-free environments of 2009 calls on EU countries to protect people from being exposed to tobacco smoke in public places and at work.

About 30 million Europeans are affected by rare and complex diseases. To help with diagnoses and therapies, the EU set up the European Reference Networks (ERNs) in 2017. The 24 existing virtual networks bring together specialists from different countries working on different issues, for example on patient safety or prevention of antimicrobial resistance.

Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is on the rise, due to the overuse of antibiotics, improper disposal of medicines or the lack of development of new substances. It causes about 33,000 deaths per year in the EU. The EU's 2017 action plan against antimicrobial resistance aims to promote awareness and better hygiene as well as stimulate research. A new regulation on
Veterinary medicinal products was adopted in 2018, to curb the use of antibiotics in farming and halt the spread of resistances from animals to humans.

Several EU countries are facing outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases such as measles, due to insufficient vaccination coverage rates. In a resolution adopted in 2018, MEPs call for a better aligned schedule for vaccination across Europe, more transparency in the production of vaccines and joint purchases to reduce prices.

Fighting drug-resistant infections

Cleaner air, cleaner water

Poor air quality is the number one environmental cause of premature death in Europe. Since the early 1970s, the EU has taken action to control emissions of harmful substances. In 2016 a new directive was adopted setting tougher national emission limits for key air pollutants, such as nitrogen oxides, to halve their impact on health compared to 2005.

The Water Framework Directive protects EU waters and concerns all ground and surface waters, including rivers, lakes and coastal waters.

Bathing waters are monitored for bacteria by EU countries through the bathing water directive. The EU is also updating its drinking water directive to further improve the quality of drinking water as well as access to it while also reducing waste caused by the consumption of bottled water.

Safe food

The EU has rules guaranteeing a high level of safety at all stages of the food production and distribution process. In 2017, official inspections throughout the food chain were tightened.

There are specific hygiene rules for:

- food of animal origin
- food contamination (setting maximum levels for contaminants such as nitrates, heavy metals or dioxins)
• novel foods (produced from micro-organisms or with a new primary molecular structure)
• food contact materials (such as packaging materials and tableware).

The EU also has a strict legal framework for the cultivation and commercialisation of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) used in feed and food. The European Parliament is particularly attentive to potential health risks and has opposed plans for the authorisation of new genetically modified plants such as soybeans.

In 2019, MEPs proposed a report on how to improve the sustainable use of pesticides and backed the report of its special committee advocating more transparent authorisation procedures.

With more consumers buying organic food, the EU updated its rules on organic farming in 2018 to have stricter controls and better prevention of contamination.

In May 2020 the European Commission proposed a new EU food sustainability strategy that aims to ensure safe, nutritious and healthy food.

Healthy workplaces

EU legislation sets minimum health and safety requirements to protect you in the workplace, whilst allowing member states to apply stricter provisions. There are specific provisions on the use of equipment, the protection of pregnant and young workers and the exposure to noise or specific substances, such as carcinogens and mutagens.

Europe’s ageing workforce and increasing retirement age create challenges for the health care system. In 2018, MEPs adopted measures to retain and reintegrate workers with injuries or chronic health problems into the workplace. This included making workplaces more adaptable through skills development programmes, ensuring flexible working conditions and providing support to workers, including coaching and providing access to a psychologist or therapist.
Inclusive society

To ensure people with disabilities participate fully in society, Parliament approved the European Accessibility Act in 2019. The new rules aim to ensure everyday products and key services - such as smartphones, computers, e-books, ticketing, check-in machines and ATMs - are accessible to elderly people and people with disabilities across the EU.

In a resolution adopted in June 2020, Parliament called for a new comprehensive and ambitious EU Disability Strategy post-2020 mainstreaming the rights of people with disabilities in all policies and areas and ensuring equal access to healthcare, education, employment, public transport and housing.

Find out more about EU social policies

- How the EU improves workers’ rights and working conditions
- Reducing unemployment: EU policies explained
- Youth employment: the EU measures to make it work
- The Parliament’s fight for gender equality

Find out more
Briefing: health and social security