European Parliament

Improving public health: EU measures explained

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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.

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" 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

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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 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, supporting research and innovation for effective treatments, coordinating requirements related to travel and scrutinizing vaccine roll-out.

Further information

Check out EU measures against Covid-19

During the pandemic, teleworking posed many challenges for workers when it came to organising working time, maintaining a work–family balance and ensuring well-being. According to a study requested by Parliament's women's rights committee, the pressure of balancing work and family caused anxiety, especially among women.

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 proposed a new EU health programme named EU4Health, which was adopted by Parliament in March 2021. The programme worth €5,1 billion aims to fill the gaps revealed by the pandemic and improve the EU's crisis management

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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

Other funds for health issues are provided by the Horizon Europe, the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), the EU's 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.

In January 2022, Parliament endorsed the agreement with the Council to increase the powers of the EU's medicines regulator. This can result in a better crisis preparedness and management for medicinal products and medical devices.

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.

During the plenary session in November 2021, the European Parliament set out a series of recommendations for the update of the EU's pharmaceutical legislation. MEPs called for affordable medicines, preventing shortages and a climate-neutral industry.

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.

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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.
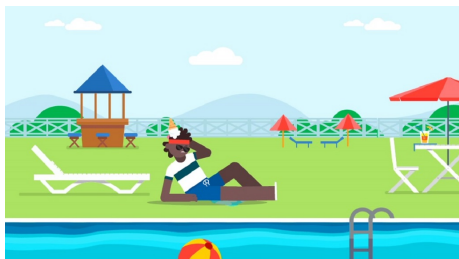
▶ **European Health Insurance Card**
https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/video/v_D01-ESN-170706

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).

In October 2022, Parliament endorsed an extended mandate for the centre, which willl enable it to take on a stronger role in supporting EU countries in preventing and controlling infectious disease threats.

In addition, MEPs also adopted a new framework on serious cross-border threats to health that will allow the EU to better anticipate and respond to future health crises. These new measures are part of the first steps towards creating a health union in Europe based on lessons learned from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Cancer

Fighting cancer has always been an EU priority. The EU invests funds in research projects and

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training programmes, adopts legislation and complements member states' efforts by sharing information and best practices. The European Commission presented an ambitious EU action plan to fight cancer called Europe's Beating Cancer Plan in February 2021.

Tobacco

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.

Rare diseases

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

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 35,000 deaths per year in the EU/EAA. 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 microorganisms resistant to medicines from animals to humans.

The Council adopted a recommendation in June 2023 seeking to encourage the prudent use of antibiotics in human and animal health.

Vaccines

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.

Mental health

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The European Parliament has long supported the importance of mental well-being. In July 2020, Parliament recognised mental health as a fundamental human right and called for an EU action plan on mental health.

In a resolution from December 2023 MEPs called on EU countries to improve access to mental health services and combat stigma, exclusion and discrimination.

In 2021 MEPs called for the right to disconnect from work outside working hours.

Fighting drug-resistant infections
https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/video/v_N01-PUB-210614-RESI

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.

Under the European Green Deal, the EU set the goal of reducing air, water and soil pollution by 2050 to levels that are not harmful to health and natural ecosystems. In April 2024, Parliament adopted new rules to improve air quality in the EU and set stricter targets for some pollutants.

Further information

Find out more about the effects of air pollution and the EU actions to reduce it

The Water Framework Directive protects EU waters and concerns all ground and surface waters, including rivers, lakes and coastal waters. Specific legislative acts cover different types of water. In September 2023, Parliament adopted its position on protecting groundwater and surface waters from pollution. New rules on the treatment and reuse of wastewater were approved by MEPs in April 2024.

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Further information

Find out more about EU measures to prevent groundwater and surface water pollution

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. Over the last two decades, plant-breeding techniques have evolved greatly, so in July 2023 the European Commission proposed a new regulation on plants produced by certain new genomic techniques. Parliament adopted its position on this proposal in February 2024.

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.

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European Accessibility Act
https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/european-accessibility-act-better-access-for-the-disabled_N01-PUB-190304-ACCE_ev

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.

To further reduce the risk of workers getting sick, MEPs voted in favour of updating EU rules on limiting harmful substances in the workplace on 17 February 2022. New rules will expand the scope of the directive on carcinogens or mutagens at work to include substances harmful to reproductive health.

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. In March 2021 Commission adopted new strategy for the period 2021-2030 to help EU countries to further improve rights and participation of people living with disabilities.

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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

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