

CANCER PREVENTION

Better Lifestyle Policies – A priority for the European Union

I-Com is calling for public authorities and national governments to urgently define cross-sectoral strategies, involving the public and private sectors and to take joint responsibility for the success of Europe's Beating Cancer Plan. **Public authorities should develop and promote community-based programs built on data monitoring, support the shift towards lifestyle policies that reduce the exposure to risk factors and encourage *harm reduction strategies*.**

Cancer Prevention – A priority for the European Union

KEY FIGURES

- **40% of people in Europe are likely to be affected by cancer at some stage in their lives.** This presents serious health, social and economic complications for both citizens and governments.
- Different factors play a role. According to the WHO, **tobacco** is responsible for approximately 25% of all cancer-related deaths (2018) and **alcohol-attributable** cancers were estimated to be responsible for 400,000 deaths worldwide (2016). Pollution of air, water and soil with **carcinogenic chemicals** contributes to the cancer burden to differing degrees depending on the geographical settings, but, it has been estimated that outdoor air pollution has contributed to 3.2 million premature deaths worldwide. All considered, tobacco consumption and excessive alcohol consumption cause about 40% of the total cancer burden. The precise figures vary from country to country. **If the consequences of inappropriate diet, obesity and insufficient physical activity are added, the percentage of cancers due to an unhealthy lifestyle rises to 60%.**
- **The WHO states between 30-50% of cancers are preventable. Evidence suggests that when people modify their lifestyle to be healthier, they are at a reduced risk of cancer.**

Europe's Beating Cancer Plan: insights and direction from the public consultation

On February 4, the European Commission launched the **first public consultation on Europe's Beating Cancer Plan** to allow EU citizens and stakeholders to express their opinion on the best ways to tackle cancer in Europe. Citizens, patients, healthcare workers, researchers, employees in the pharmaceutical sector and policy makers all contributed to the consultation on the Cancer Plan Roadmap, with a record number of **384 submissions**. Through our analysis of the submissions, there seemed to be an overarching theme related to specific sectors, as well as **encouraging the uptake of strategies such as harm reduction. Nearly 20% of contributions supported the definition of harm reduction plans for alcohol or tobacco.** One in every six recommended policies which encourage the use of reduced risk nicotine products by smokers, such as e-cigarettes. Meanwhile, approximately 15% called for guidelines and provisions on consumption and labelling for alcohol. Just under 5% (25 submissions) highlighted the impact of pollution and chemicals and, similarly, 23 submissions focused on nutrition. **Lifestyle and environment are fundamental to preventing and combating cancer.**

The main objective of the factsheet is to analyse and address the lifestyle and environmental modifiable risk factors. Nevertheless, we are aware and would like **to acknowledge the important role that secondary prevention should play.** In this context, indeed, certain types of vaccinations can intervene to significantly reduce the development of widespread cancers. For example, the vaccine for HPV (Human Papilloma Virus) has shown success in reducing the development of cervical cancer.

1. Encouraging citizens to choose a healthier lifestyle and diet

Policies should be **promoted that actively encourage citizens to choose a healthier lifestyle** and diet, to exercise and to avoid substance abuse from alcohol, tobacco and drugs. Early detection of cancer greatly increases the chances for successful treatment. There are two major elements of early cancer detection - education to promote screening participation and early diagnosis.

Health professionals should participate **in training and education** programs that encourage research that strengthens their contribution to prevention and early diagnosis and spreads awareness among health workers of cancer warning signs. They should act to encourage the spread of healthy lifestyles among patients. Health professionals should feel responsible for providing the most up-to-date information to patients on diagnostic procedures and on therapeutic paths to follow. Public authorities and national governments should intervene in order to define cross-sectoral strategies according to the 'health in all policies' framework and implement active policies that allow people to choose better lifestyles. **All stakeholders should recognize methods for prevention, such as harm reduction within health strategies to address health inequalities and champion social justice.**

Healthy lifestyles are not only a matter of willingness but also of opportunity. Legislation can thus have a deep impact on population behavior, widening the range of opportunities to the largest social groups. Moreover, legislation on prices can have a direct impact on consumption choices and habits, particularly in the most at-risk population groups. **Behavioral changes can be fostered by incentives promoting less risky alternatives**, which are effective as they help to avoid excessive exposure to carcinogenic emissions. A number of responses promoting harm reduction policies for tobacco suggested reforming taxation for tobacco products based on different evaluation of risk. Responses that supported harm reduction strategies for alcohol consumption, on the other hand, suggested intervening through a comprehensive alcohol directive and by encouraging people to drink less through awareness campaigns.

2. Integrating pragmatic and compassionate solutions such as harm reduction into health policies

Harm reduction strategies should be implemented to support the shift towards healthier lifestyles to reduce the exposure to cancer risk factors. Harm reduction approaches refer to policies, programs and practices that aim to minimize the negative health, social and economic impact associated with risk factors such as the use of alcohol, exposure to environmental challenges, overeating, combustible tobacco and nutritional behavior. Harm reduction strategies are founded on improving individual and general public health, showing that intervention is safe, practical, effective.

Harm reduction is pragmatic and focuses on risks and harm rather than on abstinence, seeking to maximize the health benefits, minimize the cost to public health and provide a solution for health inequalities across the globe. Harm reduction strategies should be “personalized”, patient-centered and included in prevention, assistance and monitoring programs.

The harm reduction approach to alcohol has had a rather controversial history where both scientific literature and popular media are concerned. Studies have revealed that harm reduction approaches to alcohol problems are at least as effective as abstinence-oriented approaches in reducing alcohol consumption and alcohol-related consequences. Harm reduction policies at a national level should be defined and implemented, including the use of alternative nicotine delivery products drawing from proven best practices, together with an EU guideline framework to be applied in different Member States. It will take many years of research to develop definitive data on reduced risk nicotine products, but it is clear that actions to promote them as potential reduced-exposure products must be taken seriously as a response to the established market. **Maximizing the collection and analysis of data will ensure that consumers as well as policymakers are accurately informed and guide public health decisions.**

3. Leveraging data and monitoring to foster informed choices

Actions should be taken not only to monitor the market, but also to shape it as scientific knowledge unfolds. Individual choices taken without a coherent harm reduction approach could further exacerbate the problems posed by tobacco, alcohol and other products, while the aggregate effect of individual informed choices could make an important contribution to public health.

Regulation needs to balance risks and benefits with the key aim of reducing risky behavior through the supply of behavioral support, review of existing practices, evaluation of the impact through monitoring and the strengthening of **science-based policymaking**.

4. Cooperating with public and private sectors in taking joint responsibility for success

National and European stakeholders have a critical role to play in the Cancer Plan. MEPs in the European Parliament, the European Commission, Member States and NGOs **can all contribute to developing an effective Beating Cancer Plan.**

We will discuss the European Parliament's role at an event hosted in late September in the European Parliament. **We hope these discussions will encourage the European Parliament and European Commission to take notice of our discussions for their Cancer Action Plan.**

