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Position Paper

Translating global and EU targets into stronger EU action on respiratory infections

A Position Paper by the European Lung Health Group

Executive Summary

Respiratory infections represent the third most common cause of death in Europe¹. The scale of this burden impacts patients, health systems and economies. By strengthening our approach and honing in on international targets set by the World Health Organization (WHO), we can tackle the burden of respiratory diseases in Europe and protect vulnerable groups.

To advance on the EU-level action on respiratory disease, the European Lung Health Group (ELHG)², which includes 9 European level patients and healthcare professionals' organisations, gathering more than 175 member associations across 42 European countries, calls on the EU to take on an integrated life-course approach to preventing respiratory diseases and develop its own policy framework on lung health.

In this position paper, we look specifically into the burden of respiratory infections and advocate the World Health Assembly (WHA) resolution on an integrated lung health approach³ to be implemented, for the EU Council Recommendations on seasonal influenza vaccination⁴ and cardiovascular health checks⁵ to be updated to include further respiratory infections and lung function screening, and for the European Commission to develop a European Lung Health Plan, ensuring that respiratory infections are reduced and we can enable EU Member States to better action.

Why is EU action on respiratory infections important?

Respiratory infections continue to place a major burden on European citizens, its health systems and economy. Progress has been made at EU level, yet our action in combatting them at EU level is fragmented. We need stronger commitment and coordination if we would like to reduce the burden of respiratory infections in the long term.



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The data says it all: seasonal influenza alone causes up to 50 million symptomatic infections and 15,000-70,000 deaths annually across the EU/EEA⁶⁷. Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) leads to approximately 250,000 hospitalisations of children under five years and around 160,000 hospitalisations of older adults each year in Europe⁸.

Looking at the actions already taken on respiratory infections, in 2009, we welcomed the adoption of the Council recommendation on seasonal influenza vaccination⁹ and the European Commission, the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and European Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (ECDC) has also since increased its competences during the COVID-19 pandemic.

European progress has not kept up with the spread of respiratory diseases and vaccine coverage remains inadequate in Europe. The evidence underscores the need to strengthen life-course immunisation policies as a central pillar of integrated lung health and healthy ageing strategies. The EU's approach needs to move beyond influenza and implement strategies for all respiratory diseases.

'We need to provide funding and treat vaccination as investment and not expenditure.' – Member of European Parliament (MEP) Aurelijus Veryga (Lithuania, European Conservatives and Reformists), EU Respi Day 2026

What can be done?

1. Implement the targets of the WHA resolution on lung health

In 2025, the WHA adopted a landmark resolution on an integrated approach to lung health, recognising for the first time the need for countries to take a coordinated approach to lung health, covering prevention, early diagnosis, treatment, rehabilitation, and long-term care, while addressing inequalities and strengthening health systems¹⁰. The WHA resolution recognises tuberculosis, pneumonia, influenza and COVID-19 among the key lung diseases that should be addressed through the integrated lung health approach. The law gives significant attention to the prevention of respiratory infections and explicitly includes vaccination and immunisation programmes as core components of integrated lung health policy.

A year on from the adoption of the resolution, there are still significant gaps in our European approach to tackling respiratory diseases and the update of the immunisation programmes the resolution at national level. The ELHG has called for stronger action and for the same targets to be set at European level¹¹.





2. Expand the Council Recommendation on seasonal influenza vaccination

Under the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the Council recommendation on seasonal influenza vaccination was adopted in 2009 and targets influenza uptake in older adults and other risk groups. Concretely, it urges Member States to reach a 75% vaccination coverage rate among older age groups and high-risk individuals, and where possible, to extend this target to people with chronic medical conditions. However, only 47.1% of adults aged 65 years and older in the EU received influenza vaccination in 2023, well below the 75% target¹². Clearly, further action is needed to boost the use of vaccination programmes.

This Council recommendation can be the benchmark for further respiratory diseases. The recommendation sets a strong EU policy basis for advocating for similar vaccine uptake and protection for people living with pulmonary fibrosis, asthma, COPD, alpha 1 trypsin deficiency and tuberculosis. The ELHG urges the Council to update the recommendation, so it includes influenza, as well as COVID 19, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), pneumococcal disease and pertussis¹³.

3. Update the Council recommendation on screening

Cardiovascular and lung health are closely connected, including on a policy level. To implement the “know your numbers” dimension of the EU Safe Heart Plan, the Commission has proposed a Council Recommendation on an EU approach to early detection and screening for cardiovascular health¹⁴. In the proposed recommendation, lung function tests are recognised within the technical annex as one of the components needed for health checks. The ELHG advocates that lung function tests be retained in the final text that Member States adopt as the recommendation.

4. Launch a European Lung Health Plan

The ELHG urges the European Commission to publish a European Lung Health Plan that can turn fragmented initiatives into coordinated EU action by bringing together priorities for access to treatments, long-term care, rehabilitation, investment, vaccination, research, air quality, tobacco and nicotine control, respiratory infections and early diagnosis. Europe needs a European Lung Health Plan to connect these efforts, give lung health the political priority it deserves and to better protect people living with lung disease¹⁵.





A European Lung Health Plan would provide the framework and would bring together action on prevention, clean air, tobacco and nicotine control, respiratory infections, earlier diagnosis, equitable access to treatment, pulmonary rehabilitation, research, innovation, investment and meaningful patient involvement. It would also encourage a Health in All Policies approach, recognising that decisions on housing, transport, workplaces and the environment all shape lung health.

‘Europe can be more ambitious and do more for lung health and even develop a European Lung Health Plan’ – MEP Tomislav Sokol (Croatia, European People’s Party), World Asthma Day 2026

How can you help?

To achieve reduction in respiratory diseases, we need both political and individual action. To facilitate the latter, on the first anniversary of the resolution, as part of the #KeepBreathing campaign, the ELHG launched a patient explainer video¹⁶ to showcase what the resolution contains and how patients, their organisations and advocates can use it as an advocacy tool at national and local level and sets out targets which governments have committed to deliver and provides a basis to assess national progress, identify gaps in care, and engage decision-makers. The video translates these commitments into practical guidance for advocacy at national level. It shows how the resolution can be used to ask clear questions on access to diagnosis, availability of treatment, prevention programmes, and follow-up care.

We also published an infographic¹⁷ on why a Europe needs a European Lung Health Plan. We encourage you to use this material within your networks and policy makers.

In summary, you to get involved by contact your national policy makers to ask them what they have planned for implementing the WHA resolution targets as well as engaging on EU level action. Additionally, we encourage the use of social media to gather the attention of a larger audience, including policymakers. This can amplify our messages and help move the needle in lung health policy at European level.

Conclusion

In this position paper, we outlined the growing burden of respiratory infections in Europe. We welcomed the existing policy action but highlight the gaps and necessary action needed at global and EU level to bring progress forward.





The ELHG is dedicated to bringing attention to the topic and will keep advocating at European level for stronger action. The key next steps for this are the implementing the WHA resolution on lung health targets, updating the Council recommendation on seasonal influenza vaccination, updating the Council recommendation on screening and publishing a European Lung Health Plan.

We encourage the community to use the ELHG materials and sources to bring forward further action.

Our policy is to #KeepBreathing, what's yours?

¹ Eurostat. (2026, May 19). *Causes of death statistics*. Statistics Explained.

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Causes_of_death_statistics

² Breathe Vision. (n.d.). *About: Who we are*. <https://breathevision.eu/about/>

³ World Health Assembly. (2025, May 27). *Promoting and prioritizing an integrated lung health approach (WHA78.5)*. World Health Organization. https://www.knowledge-action-portal.com/sites/default/files/2025-06/A78_R5-en.pdf

⁴ Council of the European Union. (2009, December 22). Council Recommendation of 22 December 2009 on seasonal influenza vaccination (2009/1019/EU). Official Journal of the European Union, L 348, 71-72. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reco/2009/1019/oj/eng>

⁵ Commission proposal for a Council Recommendation on cardiovascular health checks: an EU approach to early detection and screening [EUR-Lex - 52026DC0481 - EN - EUR-Lex](#)

⁶ Paget, J., Danielle Iuliano, A., Taylor, R. J., Simonsen, L., Viboud, C., Spreeuwenberg, P., & Global Seasonal Influenza-associated Mortality Collaborator Network and GLaMOR Collaborating Teams (2022). Estimates of mortality associated with seasonal influenza for the European Union from the GLaMOR project. *Vaccine*, 40(9), 1361–1369. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2021.11.080>

⁷ European Commission. (n.d.). *Influenza*. European Vaccination Information Portal. Retrieved September 23, 2026, from <https://vaccination-info.europa.eu/en/disease-factsheets/influenza>

⁸ Colzani, E. (2026, June 11). Respiratory viruses in the EU: An epidemiological overview and public health needs [Conference presentation, ESWI Summit]. European Scientific Working Group on Influenza (ESWI). <https://eswi.org/sites/default/files/2026->

⁹ Council of the European Union. (2009, December 22). Council Recommendation of 22 December 2009 on seasonal influenza vaccination (2009/1019/EU). Official Journal of the European Union, L 348, 71-72. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reco/2009/1019/oj/eng>

¹⁰ Breathe Vision. (2025, May 23). [Press release] *World Health Assembly commits to promoting and prioritising lung health at national level*. <https://breathevision.eu/news/press-release-world-health-assembly-commits-to-promoting-and-prioritising-lung-health-at-national-level/>

¹¹ European Lung Health Group. (2026, May 21). *The adoption of the World Health Assembly resolution on an integrated lung health approach one year on: Evidence for European level action* (Position paper). https://breathevision.eu/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Position-Paper_WHA-Lung-Health-Resolution-1.pdf

¹² Eurostat. (2026, July 20). *Influenza statistics*. Statistics Explained.

<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/SEPDF/cache/118097.pdf> [\[ec.europa.eu\]](https://ec.europa.eu)





¹³ EFA. (2026). A Manifesto for Equitable Access to Vaccination.

https://efanet.org/images/2026/final%20version_EFA_Manifesto_Equitable_Access_to_Vaccination_web_site.pdf

¹⁴ Proposal for a Council recommendation on cardiovascular health checks: an EU approach to early detection and screening – proposed [text](#) and [Annex](#):

¹⁵ Breathe Vision. (2026). *Why Europe needs a European Lung Health Plan – new infographic.*

<https://breathevision.eu/news/why-europe-needs-a-european-lung-health-plan-new-infographic/>

¹⁶ Breathe Vision. (2026). *European Lung Health Group launches patient explainer video one year after WHO lung health resolution.* <https://breathevision.eu/news/european-lung-health-group-launches-patient-explainer-video-one-year-after-who-lung-health-resolution/>

¹⁷ Breathe Vision. (2026). *Why Europe needs a European Lung Health Plan – new infographic.*

<https://breathevision.eu/news/why-europe-needs-a-european-lung-health-plan-new-infographic/>



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