



## Preventing head & neck cancers across Europe: how Policy and Policy Makers are helping

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The European Cancer Organisation (ECO) has long been advancing policies to improve cancer prevention, treatment and care across Europe. It's why ECO is so focused on head and neck cancers caused by a most ubiquitous virus: the [human papillomavirus \(HPV\)](#).

HPV - most commonly known for causing cervical cancer - also plays a major role in the development of head and neck cancers, impacting in particular the mouth, nose and throat. HPV is also directly responsible for a host of other cancers, including penile, vaginal, vulval, and anal cancers. In short, it can affect both women and men alike. [In the UK alone, about 3.2% of women in the general population are estimated to harbour cervical HPV infection at a given time, and 79% of invasive cervical cancers are attributed to HPV.](#) HPV is thought to cause 60% to 70% of oropharyngeal cancers currently in the United States and unvaccinated individuals and males are most at risk.

The best way to prevent these cancers is to vaccinate against HPV, regardless of gender, to achieve the maximum level of immunity. And since the virus is sexually transmitted, the vaccine is most effective when given to young people before they become sexually active, ideally between the ages of 9 and 17 (as recommended [by ECDC](#)).



Compared to many other cancer prevention strategies – such as tobacco control, reducing alcohol consumption, increasing physical activity or tackling obesity – HPV vaccination is safe and has an immediate positive health effect that lasts a lifetime. It is without question the simplest, most effective means of cancer prevention in the medical arsenal.

In response to this public health issue, ECO has stepped up its efforts to educate both the public and healthcare providers about the increasing threat posed by HPV-related head and neck cancers. During [Head and Neck Cancer Awareness Week 2024](#) (from 16 to 21 September), ECO worked to spotlight the importance of early detection, timely treatment, and especially prevention through vaccination.



*ECO banner for promoting Head & Neck Cancer Awareness Week 2024*

ECO has consistently advocated for wider HPV vaccination coverage across Europe, for both boys and girls, in line with the recommendations of the World Health Organization. Despite the proven effectiveness of HPV vaccination, disparities in coverage rates persist across Europe. Some countries have comprehensive national vaccination programmes, while others are lagging far behind.

ECO is working to address these inequalities by calling on national governments to expand their vaccination programmes and improve public awareness about the importance of vaccination. This aligns with Europe's Beating Cancer Plan, which provides a framework for improving cancer



care and prevention across the continent. Within this plan, HPV vaccination is a key pillar to reduce vaccine-preventable cancers, with the Plan setting vaccination targets of 90% of the EU population of girls and to significantly increase the vaccination of boys, all by 2030, to ultimately eliminate cervical cancer and other cancers caused by HPV.

ECO considers HPV such a priority that almost 5 years ago it created the [HPV Action Network](#) which now also includes Hep B. This network brings together experts from across Europe, including clinicians, researchers, youth organisations, public health professionals, and patient advocates, to share knowledge, develop best practices, and promote evidence-based strategies for prevention and treatment. Through collaboration, the HPV and Hep B Action Network ensures that the latest scientific advances and clinical innovations are translated into policy recommendations and public health initiatives as quickly as possible. Our Network is very inclusive, so if you want to get involved please contact us at: [hpv@europeancancer.org](mailto:hpv@europeancancer.org)

A central element of ECO's advocacy efforts has been promoting gender-neutral HPV vaccination programmes. For years, vaccination efforts primarily focused on girls, with the aim of preventing cervical cancer. However, given the rising incidence of HPV-related cancers in men, such as head and neck cancers, vaccinating boys is equally critical. ECO's ambitious push for gender-neutral vaccination has gained traction, with several European countries [such as Bulgaria](#) recently planning to expand their vaccination programmes to include boys. However, more work remains to be done to ensure all countries adopt this approach and achieve the high vaccination rates necessary to protect future generations from HPV-related cancers.



*Pictures from ECO's presentation of the European Cancer Manifesto in Sofia, Bulgaria, on 19 March 2024*

Finally, ECO is also coordinating [PROTECT-EUROPE](#), an EU co-funded project to bolster HPV vaccination programmes across Europe. The project places particular emphasis on addressing communication issues in both public health campaigns as well as the personal interactions between healthcare practitioners, young people, their parents, and caregivers. The project will end this year with a Showcase Event on [22 November](#) in Brussels. Key project findings and insights from two years of work will be shared with the public.



*Promotional banner for PROTECT-EUROPE's Showcase Event on 22 November 2024*

Through its advocacy, policy initiatives, and collaborative networks, we at ECO continue to prioritise and co-ordinate European efforts to reduce the incidence of these preventable cancers. By promoting widespread HPV vaccination policy, raising awareness about the risks of this virus, supporting young people when they call for availability of vaccines, and supporting early detection and treatment, we believe we are making a meaningful impact in the battle against HPV-related cancers.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you would like more information, or would like to get involved. My email address is [kellydm@cardiff.ac.uk](mailto:kellydm@cardiff.ac.uk)