

## 14 ways you can help prevent cancer

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### Recommendation 9 for Policy-makers on Cancer-causing factors at work

- **Scale up efforts to enforce existing European Union (EU) legislation on occupational carcinogens, including compliance with binding occupational exposure limits.**
- **Encourage all economic sectors with exposure to carcinogens to work with social partners to develop and implement social dialogue agreements for reduction of the prevalence and levels of exposure, and to monitor and publish key performance indicators. Support small and medium-sized enterprises and self-employed workers to actively engage with such initiatives.**
- **Include specific occupational safety and health (OSH) requirements in the criteria for public procurement, to support the elimination and/or reduction of workers' exposure to carcinogens in the workplace.**
- **Ensure that knowledge on safe work practices and how to prevent exposure to carcinogens is integrated into educational programmes, including in vocational training.**

### Executive summary

Cancer is the main cause of work-related mortality in the 27 EU Member States. Currently, 45.6% of annual occupational deaths are attributed to work-related cancers. Their consequences, and impact on society, extend beyond mortality or morbidity figures, including the reduction in the quality of life of patients and their caregivers, productivity losses, and increased health-care costs. An additional benefit of reducing exposure to occupational carcinogens is the decrease in the risks of developing other diseases, such as fibrosis of the lung or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

Protecting workers from exposure to carcinogens at work is the ultimate responsibility of employers under EU legislation, and companies of all sizes should receive adequate support and guidance. The goal should be the substitution and elimination of carcinogens in the workplace. Integrated approaches through policies that address enforcement of current legislation while offering support and facilitating dialogue and educational training programs are particularly important. This policy brief describes international policies and guidelines that support policy-makers and other stakeholders to implement the European Code Against Cancer, 5th edition (ECAC5) policy recommendation to address the cancer burden caused by occupational exposure to carcinogens.

### Key policy actions to reduce occupational exposure to carcinogens

- **Scale up efforts to enforce existing EU legislation on occupational carcinogens, including compliance with binding occupational exposure limits.**
  - Successful implementation of the EU Directive on carcinogens at work (CMR Directive 2004/37/EC) can only be achieved by combining action at the EU and national levels. OSH-specific guidance for national labour inspectorates to assess the control of exposure to carcinogens in the workplace and compliance with occupational exposure limits (OELs) is essential to support this. Employers must ensure that risk assessments are carried out and effective risk management measures are introduced and maintained (adhering to the hierarchy of control). Appropriate training and information should be provided, and, if necessary, workers' health surveillance conducted. Sector-specific risk assessment tools, practical guidance, or accessible and specific training packages can greatly support small and medium-sized companies fulfil these legal requirements.

- **Encourage all economic sectors with exposure to carcinogens to work with social partners to develop and implement social dialogue agreements for reduction of the prevalence and levels of exposure, and to monitor and publish key performance indicators. Support small and medium-sized companies and self-employed workers to actively engage with such initiatives.**

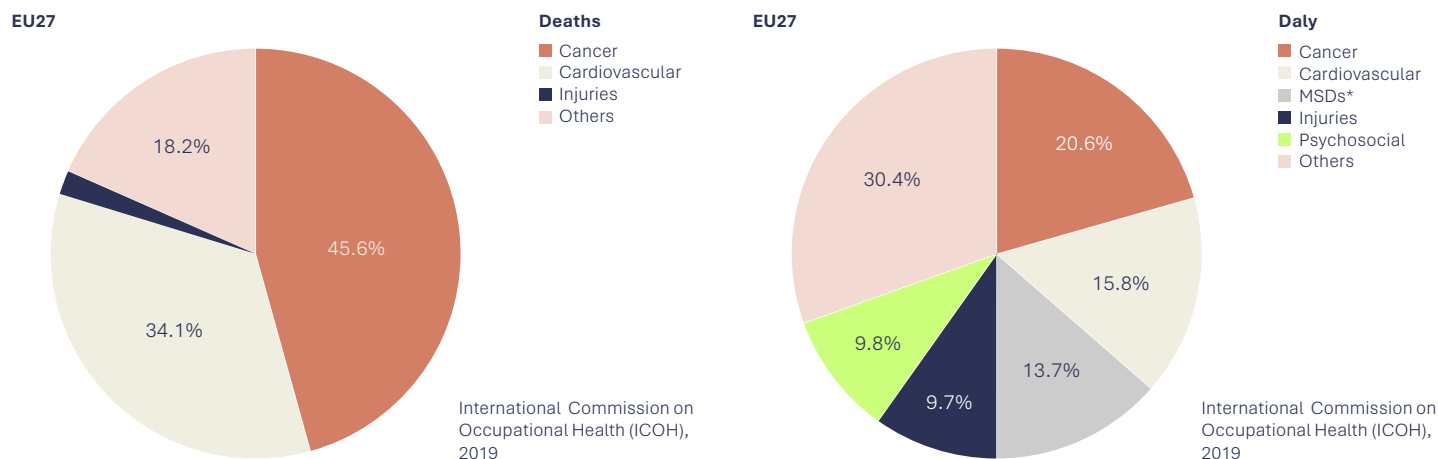
- Promote social dialogue and ensure the involvement of social partners in decision-making and the implementation of OSH legislation. Engaging industry and workers' representatives in the fight against occupational cancer is a powerful tool to effectively reduce exposure to carcinogens in the workplace, as demonstrated by existing voluntary agreements on carcinogens, such as formaldehyde (Formacare) or silica (Nepsi). Support EU-wide voluntary initiatives, such as the Roadmap on Carcinogens, that mobilize industries and sectors, occupational prevention organizations, and inspectorates to work together in the fight against work-related cancer.

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- **Include specific OSH requirements in the criteria for public procurement, to support the elimination and/or reduction of workers' exposure to carcinogens in the workplace.**

▫ Like with the legally binding green public procurement requirements included in some EU legislation, OSH requirements (explicitly referring to controlling exposure to occupational carcinogens) should be incorporated into public purchasing and leasing specifications. Compliance with these OSH criteria should

extend to subcontractors and their workers, because it is common in some sectors (e.g. construction) to outsource work to third parties. Training should be provided to all workers before they start work, including to migrant and self-employed workers, and systems should be put in place to regularly monitor the OSH performance of contractors' activities on site. Private companies should be encouraged to adopt similar procurement requirements.



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**Figure 1. Estimated relative contribution of work-related diseases and injuries to occupational deaths and DALYS in the EU-27.**

Source: EU-OSHA, OSH Barometer data; ICOH estimates 2022 (See: <https://visualisation.osha.europa.eu/osh-barometer/accidents-diseases-well-being/work-related-diseases/icoh/disease-groups-per-country>)

\*MSDs = musculoskeletal disorders

## Risk of cancer

- Many known human carcinogens are widespread in EU workplaces, including those generated by work processes, such as respirable crystalline silica, wood dust, or welding fumes.
- In 2023, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) estimated that 47% of workers in six EU Member States were exposed to at least one of the 24 cancer risk factors included in the Workers' Exposure Survey. Exposure to more than one carcinogen is frequent in some sectors.
- Work-related cancer is a major cause of occupational mortality in the 27 EU Member States, well above other causes of death (i.e. cardiovascular diseases or work-related injuries). However, mortality alone does not give a complete picture of the burden of disease borne by individuals and its impact on society. Occupational cancer is also the largest work-related cause of total number of years lost due to ill health, disability, or early death (DALY)\*.

\*One disability-adjusted life year (DALY) equals the loss of the equivalent of one year of full health.

## References

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European Parliament and Council Directive 2009/148/EC on the protection of workers from the risks related to exposure to asbestos at work

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