




A Europe that cares, prepares and protects

Health Priorities for the Belgian Council Presidency





The Belgian Presidency of the Council of the EU comes in the first half of 2024 and at the end of the von der Leyen Commission's term of office. We see this as an ideal opportunity to contribute to Europe's health agenda for the next term (2024-2029).

In this context, Belgium will focus on three major themes during its Presidency: care, preparedness and protection. Through this lens, we will work with the Member States, the European Parliament and the Commission on policy proposals that can further strengthen the European Health Union and protect the wellbeing of EU citizens.

Introduction

COVID-19 has demonstrated that the EU is a crucial actor when dealing with health crises. For example, an unprecedented European collaboration allowed us to offer a COVID-19-vaccine to all of our citizens. This was a remarkable success, considering the limited tools the EU had available. Health authorities worked collectively, in solidarity, as this offered the best chance of success.

This sense of collective action remains important as the EU continues to have to deal with new emergencies: war, inflation, migration, mpox, natural disasters, and increasingly serious disruptions in the supply of medicinal products. Together with the risk of new pathogens with pandemic potential, the increasing level of antimicrobial resistance, the impact of climate change, and the risk of CBRNe threats, this makes a strong case for the EU to further strengthen its **health emergency preparedness and response systems**.

Meanwhile, we also increasingly experience the **limits of our health care systems**. The Covid-19 pandemic has been a stress test for our health care systems, showing a number of gaps and opportunities for improvement, notably in terms of health work force. But also in terms of availability and affordability of medicines that correspond to our public health needs, our health systems face increasing challenges. These issues are shared among all member states, and can only be adequately addressed working together at EU level.

And finally, the EU is increasingly confronted with severe **medicines shortages**. Recently, essential medicines such as antibiotics, thrombolytics and insulin were particularly difficult to obtain, while antipyretics and painkillers were also in short supply. These problems are not new but medicine shortages have increased over the past few years. The reasons for shortages are complex and the EU is becoming increasingly dependent on imports from a few manufacturers and regions for its medicines supply.

Aim of the Belgian presidency

The Belgian Council Presidency will come at the end of the 2019-2024 legislative cycle. It will therefore aim to **finish ongoing trilogues** on the EU Health Data Space and the regulation on Substances of Human Origin. Furthermore, it will seek to move forward the negotiations for the Pharmaceutical legislation, the recommendation on vaccine preventable cancers and the recommendation for a smoke free environment.

Moreover, the Presidency will strive to **give shape to the health agenda for the next European Commission**. With a broad view and a series of concrete policy proposals we want to enrich the European health agenda for the future, an agenda that puts the health of our population at the center in a time where (health) security is no longer a given. Therefore, we will have to argue firmly as health ministers that health should remain high on Europe's agenda. With the Belgian Presidency we want to give the EU a boost in that sense.

And lastly, the Belgian presidency also sees the opportunity to make proposals on the **implementation tools** the EU has at its disposal to foster EU action in the area of health. Notably, improving the functioning of joint actions and accessing EU funding for health will be part of the focus.

Policy areas

Under the slogan “a Europe that cares, prepares and protects”, we selected a number of policy areas in which we believe that collaboration at EU level should be strengthened. Our aim is to present concrete policy proposals in these different areas and to stimulate the discussion among member states on these topics.

A Europe that cares

Belgium wants to address how Europe can support Member States in ensuring availability of sufficient **health workforce** with the right skills to sustain their health care systems. Demographic, social evolutions and developments in medical technology all have a significant impact on the knowledge and skills required today and in the future. What is the skill mix we need? Which function differentiation? We want to discuss the role of the EU in addressing these challenges, including the impact of the Professional Qualifications Directive on the organisation of health care professions.

Furthermore, public incentives for medical research and innovation are currently not always addressing the highest medical needs for our patients and society. The EU has a crucial role in these mechanisms through its important research funding programs, as well as through regulatory incentives. Therefore, the presidency wants to launch a discussion for a shift towards a **needs-driven system**. To this end, Belgium intends to propose a common methodology to identify and assess unmet needs and define priorities in an evidence-based manner.

And finally, while there are already many sound arguments for the prevention of non-communicable diseases (related to health, budgetary matters and economy of well-being), COVID-19 added one more argument to this list: **healthy populations** are also more resilient to different types of crises. We believe that the EU should continue to work on the prevention of non-communicable diseases. In this context, Belgium wants to bring the negotiations on the Council recommendation vaccine-preventable cancer and the council recommendation on smokefree environment to an adoption by the Council, as well as organise a stock taking exercise on the Europe Beating Cancer plan, which could lead to a call to continue action addressing non-communicable disease.

A Europe that prepares

We need to implement the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic in order to be ready for the future. With the adoption of the EU Health Union legal package and the creation of the Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA), the work related to health emergency preparedness is only starting. The Belgian Council Presidency will do a stock taking exercise of the post-pandemic **EU health emergency governance framework**.

It will reflect on whether in the event of a new health emergency, the EU will be able to rely on: (i) the right tools and procedures to deal with the crisis; (ii) the financial means to effectively secure adequate resources; (iii) the structures and institutions to develop coordinated, multi-level response strategies; (iv) the means and advice to speak with authority and legitimacy to the general public; and (v) sufficient intelligence to collect data and relevant information, and translate it into actionable insights.

In this context, the Presidency will also look to expand the EU's **capacity to conduct large scale clinical trials**. During the pandemic, WHO recorded over 18,000 COVID-19 clinical trials, the vast majority (95%) of which are thought to have contributed nothing to the evidence base due to failure to complete enrolment or poor design features. An unprecedented number of academic clinical trials have also been launched in the EU to speed up COVID-19 treatment and prevention. Despite these efforts, a lack of coordination across Member States resulted in a chaotic landscape with numerous underpowered trials that could not provide meaningful results and a duplication of research activities. The Presidency will work on the development of concrete actions for strengthening the European ecosystem for public clinical trial platforms.

Moreover, the Presidency will continue the work of the Swedish and Spanish Presidencies on the "silent pandemic" of **antimicrobial resistance**. ECDC estimates that 35.000 people die each year in the EU from antimicrobial-resistant infections. We intend to discuss the EU's AMR governance, the implementation of effective, results-driven, policy measures to optimise use of antibiotics, how to stimulate the R&D of new antibiotics and sustainable access to existing ones.

Finally, the Presidency will prioritise the finalisation of the negotiations on the **International Pandemic Accord** and the **International Health Regulations**.

A Europe that protects

The EU has been confronted with severe medicines shortages over the past few years, with studies indicating that notifications increased by 60% between 2017 and 2019 alone. To address the issue, 23 countries supported a non-paper that proposes three measures to help relieve the worst effects of shortages on patients, as well as provide a more structural answer to the underlying causes, namely: 1) a voluntary **solidarity mechanism** to address acute shortages, 2) a **European list of critical medicines** whose supply, production and value chains must be monitored, and 3) a **Critical Medicines Act** to strengthen Europe's manufacturing base for critical medicines and reduce dependencies and market consolidations.

The Commission responded in October 2023 with the **Communication "Addressing medicine shortages in the EU"**. The action points in this communication will be further developed under our Presidency. For instance, the **solidarity mechanism**, which is now operational, will be further strengthened. Furthermore, the Communication announced that the Commission will publish a **stockpiling strategy** and set up a Critical Medicines Alliance, in anticipation of a Critical Medicines Act.

The **Critical Medicines Alliance** will be launched under the Belgian Presidency, and will bring together the Commission, the Member States and stakeholders to ensure production of the most critical medicines and components in Europe. The Alliance will prioritise medicines based on the results of a vulnerability analysis that the Commission is currently conducting for products on the Union List of Critical Medicinal Products.

Events under the Presidency



EPSCO Health

Council Meetings

- 23 & 24 April 2024: Informal EPSCO Health
- 21 June 2024: Formal EPSCO Council Health

EPSCO Health Events

- 8 & 9 February 2024: Joint Meeting Chief Medical Officers & Working Party on Public Health at High Level
- 26 & 27 March 2024: High-level Conference on the Future EU Health Union
- 17 & 18 April 2024: High-level Conference on Healthcare needs as drivers for healthcare policy and innovation
- 8 May 2024: High level Conference on Antimicrobial resistance

Other Health Events under the Belgian Presidency

- 30/31 January 2024: Conference on mental health and work
- 20 March 2024: Informal Team Europe-Africa ministerial event on health in development
- 25 April 2024: Scientific symposium on Nutriscore
- 2 & 3 May 2024: Integrating Care, Strengthening Communities: The Data Connection
- 14 & 15 May 2024: Europe united against old and new pandemics
- 28 & 29 May 2024: The Genome Data Infrastructure and Genome of Europe – towards R&I and healthcare of the future

